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Jacob Parappally

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Jesus and Society

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Editorial

Utopian dreams and eschatological visions enthuse people to keep alive their hope in a situation of hopelessness. They dream about the dawn of a society in which they can live in peace, harmony and prosperity. God's revelation through Jesus Christ is that God also wills that humans live a life worthy of their vocation as humans and God provides the means to accomplish it. The greatest means God could offer to humans was he himself becoming human and showing how humans could build a society of love, justice, equality, freedom, fellowship and reconciliation. The Christian experience of God in Jesus Christ is that God is a human-centred God. Human concerns become God's concerns. No wonder then, that Jesus, the God become human, confronted the society of his time because its stratifications, power-structures, social relationships, economic systems were all unjust and inhuman. Even in a situation of injustice and oppression humans could have recourse to God and cry to Him for liberation as they had done at the time of oppression in Egypt.

A society in which socio-political and religious systems and structures are manipulated by a few dehumanize a large majority of the people of that society. They not only trample on the dignity of humans but also make God suffer because God is involved in human life and history. Jesus denounced this situation of oppression and injustice and paid the price for his stand against oppressive systems. But he showed a way to realize God's dream of a human society which he called the Kingdom of God or the reign of God. It was not thought of a theocratic society but a society in which all humans, male or female, rich or poor, able-bodied or weak, healthy or sick, religious or irreligious are treated with dignity as human persons and can grow and unfold as humans. It is a society in which there are no insiders and outsiders, no natives and foreigners, no Jew or Gentile but only God's children. They are not governed by God

but by self-emptying love of one for another exercised through servant leadership.

This issue of *Jeevadhara* discusses the theme *Jesus and Society*. Jesus' confrontation with the social situation of his time gives us an insight into God's view of humans and their society. Jesus' own unique experience of God as *Abba* was the source of his vision of the society of his time. Therefore, he stands against the system and stands for the cause of God for humans and their well-being. For any form of dehumanization amounts to blasphemy because by it the image of God is tarnished.

In his article, "When the slain Lamb stands up to the Eagle and the Fox: Jesus and the Religio-Political Leaders" Joseph Lobo SJ, explains how Jesus' critique of the socio-political, religious and economic situation of the society which he calls 'the Empire' and Jesus' own offer of another alternative empire which he calls the reign of God or indeed the empire of God! For 'the Empire' of the powers that be, humans are only historical realities that can be treated as objects, manipulated, enslaved and used. For Jesus, humans are not only historical but also spiritual beings and therefore society must be organized in such a way that it enhances the integral development of humans both historical and spiritual. Though Jesus does not provide us with a blue-print to organize human life in a society he suggests the parameters within which any such system or structure should work, namely, non-violence, sharing, service, fraternity, justice, compassion, forgiveness, humility and love.

Varghese Abhilash IMS reflects in his article on the spirituality of inclusion that Jesus lived and practised, "Jesus' Spirituality of Inclusion and Social Concern". In a society which was divided on the basis of ritual purity, membership in religious groups, financial status, religion, gender and nationality and a society which practised the ideology of exclusion by justifying it on religious grounds, Jesus preached and practised a religiosity or spirituality of inclusion. He did not exclude anyone from the society of God's dream which he shared through his intense and deep experience of God, whom he called *Abba*. With an unusual spiritual authority he proclaimed that God is to be worshipped not in religious places like Gerizim and Jerusalem, but in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23). Jesus

did not come to found a formal religion with its elaborate and intricate system of positive commandments and negative prohibitions. He came to unite people so that they could live in communion with one another and with God. Therefore, it is imperative that the Church should not exclude anyone from its communion. In the context of the movement of *Khrishbhaktas* of Varanasi, the author asks whether the Church is becoming a sign of God's kingdom where every person of good will and faith is welcome.

Jesus's spirituality of inclusion finds expression in His concern for the marginalized, especially women and other subalterns. In her article, "Jesus' Radical Option for Women: A Feminist Critical Reading of the Bent Woman in Luke 13: 10-17", Pauline Chakkalakal DSP argues that Jesus' miracle of healing the bent woman is an expression of His way of liberating women from all forms of oppression and is a critique of the systems and structures that would not let women live as human persons with inalienable rights and dignity. The New Testament presents Jesus as one who had a special concern for women. In his presence women felt recognized, accepted and loved. The Gospels present Jesus as accepting women and their partnership in his ministry and sends a powerful message to the society of his time that like men, like men, women too have resources to contribute to the welfare of the society. When the men of his society used their maleness to dominate and domesticate women, Jesus acknowledges and upholds their human dignity as human persons and their right to discipleship. The author attempts to interpret the Lukan narrative of the healing of a bent woman on the Sabbath from the perspective of the experience of women in our male-dominated society and Church in order to bring out the relevance of Jesus' attitude and action that can challenge both men and women to create a society of equals and a Church of equal discipleship.

In his article, "Jesus' Approach to the Subaltern Issues", Roy Lazar A. explains why Jesus invited and challenged a specific group of people even though his proclamation of the reign of God was addressed to all. The subalterns are made subalterns and marginalized by the powerful and the power-structures of the society. Jesus identifies himself with them in order to empower them to regain their rightful place in the society.

The God, whom Jesus experienced, was a God for whom any form of dehumanization affects God himself. Therefore, he guarantees the poor and marginalized that God is on their side. There is no other shorter way to actualize the reign of God in our times than following Jesus who by his total commitment and love to God the Father and to the entire creation unfolded a tri-fold mission of the reign of God, namely, '*Denunciation, Annunciation and Transformation*', i.e. a prophetic denunciation of the evil, announcement of the Good News to the poor and transformation of the sinful structures and a reconstruction of them in accordance with the norms of the reign of God.

The articles of this issue provide us with challenging insights into the way we should commit ourselves to create a society as disciples of Jesus. Prophets need to proclaim again and again the same message till it disturbs the listener and move him or her for a change of attitude leading to positive action. This is necessary for a meaningful Christian life in our society that is becoming increasingly insensitive to the suffering of the poor and the marginalized due to the benefits of globalization enjoyed by a large number of middle class people in our country. Jesus' approach to the society of his time with prophetic courage and commitment continues to challenge us. Jesus was not a political strategist or an expert in social engineering. But he had a clear idea about what a society should not be and positively what it should be. The Kingdom he proclaimed, for which he lived and died is the society in which humans can unfold and become humans. It is a society in which God reigns not as a ruler who imposes his will on others but as a good friend who does everything possible for the other, even willing to die for the other because for this God humans are more important than law, religion and established order. To be on the side of this God is to be like Jesus siding with the poor, the marginalized and the abandoned.

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When the Slain Lamb Stands Up to the Eagle and the Fox

Jesus and the Religio-Political Leaders

Joseph Lobo

The gospels as well as the letters in the New Testament basically articulate Jesus' critique of 'the Empire' and all its temporal and spiritual manifestations and offer a sketch of an alternative society with its historical as well as eschatological dimensions, whose governing principle is the Reign of God. During Jesus' time there were many groups, who resisted 'the Empire'. But the response of the movement inaugurated by Jesus stands out due to its simultaneously historical and eschatological, spiritual and temporal characteristics. In the perception of Jesus, human being is as much a historical (therefore political, economic, cultural, material, social etc.) as a spiritual being. The rule of 'the Empire' although is socio-political-economic, nevertheless it affects the 'spiritual' in its victims. Hence there cannot be a purely political or spiritual freedom without endangering the integrity of the human being. All these realms of human reality that are affected by 'the Empire' need to be addressed. The praxis of Jesus does precisely that. It is true that Jesus does not give a blue print of the new human society in terms of concrete structures and systems. He only suggests the parameters within which any such system or structure should work. They are non-violence, service, fraternity, justice, compassion, forgiveness, humility and love.

Joseph Lobo SJ holds a doctorate in systematic theology from the University of Innsbruck, Austria. He has published the book, *Encountering Jesus Christ in India* and a number of scholarly articles in various theological journals. At present he is the director of the Jesuit Regional Theologate in Bangalore.

Introduction

This essay explores the various dimensions of Jesus' response to the religio-political leaders of his time as reported mainly in the four canonical gospels. We are aware that the gospels are neither biographies nor accurate historical records; but are kerygmatic texts of the early Christian communities, who in the light of their experience of the resurrection of Jesus and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit retrieved the memory of Jesus Christ in their respective contexts. Central to this process was witnessing (either directly or indirectly) the historical events related to Jesus of Nazareth and understanding their deeper import in the light of the resurrectional faith. It is here that history assumes faith dimensions, and faith is historicised.¹ We take for granted that despite their triple *Sitz im Leben* – ministry of Jesus, concerns of the early Christian communities and the theological motifs of NT authors – the NT texts announce one and the same Gospel of Jesus Christ. We shall approach the NT data related to our theme, with this hermeneutical key.

The religio-political background of the New Testament

The gospel references to 'Kingdom of God', 'Father' (as addressed to God), 'will of the Father', 'works' (*erga*), 'signs' (*semeia*), exorcisms and other miracles of Jesus, his table fellowships, activities and sayings related to the temple of Jerusalem and the apocalypse have distinct religio-political setting(s). The Roman Empire and the local religio-political leadership in Palestine (Herodians, Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes and the elders) and the ordinary people constitute this context.² The

¹ For a detailed discussion on this topic see J. Lobo SJ, "Mythicization of History and Historicization of Myths and Mythologies: Interplay of Religion and Politics and its Significance for a Liberative Religious Discourse and Praxis in Asia", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 72, No. 1, January 2008, 22-37.

² The following are some studies that view the NT as a resistive (if not subversive) response to the rule of Caesar and of the Palestinian aristocracy: Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* [3rd ed.; Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2003]) first appeared in the late 1968; Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), 2003; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (Maryknoll, NY, ORBIS), 1988, 1994; Wilf Wilde, *Crossing the Fire: Mark's Gospel and Global Capitalism*, (Epworth Press, Werrington) 2006; Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, (Harrisburg, Pa. Trinity Press International), 2001.

characteristic negativity of this context was marked by the heavy burden of both state and religious taxations, and the nexus between the temple leaders, the Herodian family and Caesar. Such a nexus produced a big economic gap between the elite and the common people.³ It is not possible to interpret the New Testament without taking into consideration this historical backdrop.⁴ Albeit, the *Sitz im Leben* of the NT communities, and the theological motifs of the NT authors make the interpretative context further complex. However, despite such complexity, *one of the* useful categories under which we can interpret the relevant NT texts is: RESISTANCE to the Roman Empire and its various local and 'international' forms (henceforth 'the Empire') manifested in the individual authorities and structures.⁵

In this context, Hank Spaulding's insightful characterization of the Empire is enlightening. He lists the following: a) It is a unique political reality; b) It seeks to advance its own local interests on a global scale; c) It defies any permanent borders; d) It promises 'hope' to the people it governs by establishing 'saviour-like' structures, which in turn legitimize its rule; e) It defines for everyone who are 'friends' and who are 'enemies'

³ Palestinian Jews in the first century under Roman authority were divided into two social strata: the elite and the non-elite. Each of these groups was further divided into smaller groups. The elite group included: (a) the provincial aristocracy: Herodian ruling house, priestly and lay aristocracy, members of the Sanhedrin; and (b) administrative and military retainers, functionaries, priests, scribes, local judges, chief tax collectors, foreign traders, and wholesalers. The non-elite groups were made up of small farmers, tenants, traders, ordinary tax collectors, businessmen, day laborers, fishermen, widows, orphans, shepherds, prostitutes, beggars, and bandits. See Mery Kolimon, "Empowerment: a new generative theme of Christian mission in a globalized world", *Exchange*, 40 no 1 2011, 45-46.

⁴ From the 1st century BC till the 2nd century AD there were widespread revolts against Herod's rule with the help of Roman troops; and at Herod's death in 4 B.C against the Herodians, high priesthood, and Romans. The great revolt of 66-70 AD, and again of 132-35 AD can be especially highlighted. Apart from these, scribal groups as well as peasants and Jerusalemites protested repeatedly against the rulers. See Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and empire", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 59 no 3-4 2005, 56, 58.

⁵ Richard Horsley, *Ibid.* 44, 53. Horsley's three other prominent works on this issue are: *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Jewish Palestine* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row), 1987; *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 2003; *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad), 2006.

and in its view no one has any other choice than to be one of these; f) It sees justice as that which is helpful for the upkeep of its rule and as unjust, that which threatens it.⁶

It is important to note that it would not do justice to the 1st century life patterns in the Roman Empire if one were to neatly distinguish or separate their spiritual, political, cultural and religious dimensions. Besides, in the Apocalyptic worldview of the several NT texts, state powers were taken to be finally belonging to Satan, who for the moment controlled the world (Luke 4:5-7; 2 Cor 4:4; 1 John 5:19, cf. Rev 13). The cosmic powers are referred to as “rulers,” “principalities,” “powers,” “authorities,” “dominions,” “cosmic powers,” “thrones,” “spiritual forces,” “elemental spirits of the universe,” and “gods” – cf. Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 2:6, 8; 8:5; 15:24, 2 Cor 4:4, Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:8, 10, 15, 20; Gal 4:3, 8-9). It meant that the rule of Satan stood behind all that was politically, socio-economically, psychically, spiritually and in any other way experienced as oppressive and enslaving. Hence “the Empire” has to be understood as more than a mere politico-economic entity. It is the visible face of the ‘invisible’ satanic rule. In this context Jesus’ followers believed that he came “to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8); especially in his death and resurrection he broke “the power of him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14). Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities” and “made a public spectacle of them” (Col 2:15). By the power of his resurrection “all things” were placed “under his feet” (Heb 2:8), and he sat “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked” (Eph 1:21, cf. Col 1:20).⁷

We can safely conclude that the gospels as well as the letters in the NT basically articulate Jesus’ critique of ‘the Empire’ and all its temporal and spiritual manifestations and offer a sketch of an alternative society with its historical as well as eschatological dimensions, whose governing

⁶ Hank Spaulding, “Empire, evil, eschaton, and location of forgiveness as a political/apocalyptic act”, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 47 no 1 Spr 2012, 91.

⁷ Gregory A. Boyd, “The kingdom as a political-spiritual revolution”, *Criswell Theological Review*, ns 6 no 1 Fall 2008, 26-27

principle is the Reign of God. This central vision unifies its contextually differing articulations, found in the different books of the NT.⁸ Therefore *“Whoever wants to avoid the theme of empire today, must also avoid the Bible. God’s contention with imperial structures of domination is central to all phases of biblical history.”*⁹

During Jesus’ time there were many groups, who resisted ‘the Empire’. But the response of the movement inaugurated by Jesus stands out due to its simultaneously historical and eschatological, spiritual and temporal characteristics. Indeed ‘the Empire’ is resisted and confronted by the ‘Reign of God’. Within this broad framework we shall study Jesus’ response as presented by the NT authors.

The response of Jesus movement

In the context explicated above, the so called Jesus movement tried to give a response. Under the umbrella concept of “Jesus movement” we include the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, his disciples – those who accompanied him in his ministry as well as those who joined them after the resurrection of Jesus in the ministry of the early Church, especially during the formative period of the NT. We take it for granted that though the different shades of this response might vary in different contexts, nevertheless, they remain faithful to the central thrusts given by Jesus himself.

Jesus and power

“Lording it over” seems to be the most prevalent type of the exercise of power during the time of Jesus. The Roman rulers and their local associates in Palestine exhibited their power in terms of controlling the populace in all possible ways. The Jesus movement makes a sharp critique of it and suggests a radically different type of power and ways of

⁸ Ulrich Duchrow, “The people of God in the context of imperial politics, economics and ideology in Biblical and ecumenical perspective: In honour of Klaus Nuernberger”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no 134 JI 2009, 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

exercising it.¹⁰ Accordingly, power does not consist in domination and violence but in humble service, especially on the part of those who desire to be leaders (cf. Mt 20:25f and parallels). From such an understanding of power we shall now look at Jesus' response to some of the individuals and structures of power of his time.

Under the draconian taxation system of 'the Empire' and the Temple that levied taxes, tithes and other offerings, the resources of the peasants got steadily depleted. Many of them fell into debts and would be at each other's throats for the recovery of loans. This destroyed the otherwise harmonious village communities. Incidentally we see even today, how the brutality of the contemporary Empire creates local unrest. Jesus' preaching about the need to forgive one's enemies (Lk 6: 27.35), to cancel the debts (Lk 11:4), his covenantal meal – the Last Supper – etc. can be seen as attempts to rebuild such communities on the basis of the ancient covenant relationship (Ex 24:3-8).¹¹ Such communities based on egalitarianism, mutual cooperation and reconciliation would prove that a world other than that which was created by the 'the Empire' was possible. The power concept of 'the Empire' is thoroughly challenged with the egalitarian and service centred life patterns of the Reign of God.

What is of utmost significance is Jesus' renouncing of the power as society in general understood it, by refusing to be identified as the messiah of Jewish expectations – a political figure who would violently bring the Roman occupation of Palestine to an end. This stand was not just theoretical, but became concrete in the death of Jesus, who would allow himself to be inflicted with violence rather than inflicting violence on others, even in self-defence. Thereby he posed a serious challenge to 'the Empire' and its ideology that believed in violence either in carrying out the conquest of the weak or in defending its own interests.¹² "He would not even legitimize the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-

¹⁰ See John C. Hutchison, "Servanthood: Jesus' countercultural call to Christian leaders", *Bibliotheca sacra*, 166 no 661 Ja-Mr 2009, 64-69.

¹¹ Richard Horsley, "Jesus and empire", *op.cit.*, 71. 72

¹² Gregory A. Boyd, *op.cit.*, 25.

prone way of running the world to the point of allowing it to set the terms of his revolt against it. He rather revolted against it by simply remaining faithful to the God-centered, other-oriented, *agape-promoting*, alternative Kingdom.”¹³

Jesus, the Roman Empire, and Caesar

In the Markan narrative of Jesus’ ministry of healing and exorcising a threefold power-struggle is depicted: the *possessed individual*, the *spirit world* where God is defeating Satan, and by implication the *political world*, where ‘the Empire’ is critiqued and its demise is announced. For instance, in the exorcism of the Gerasene villager (Mark 5:1-20), the demon is identified as “Legion,” i.e. the Roman troops. When Legion enters the (military) “company” of swine¹⁴, it rushes down the hill into the “sea”, and destroys itself. To be sure this is a symbolic anticipation of what God’s rule is bringing about – a definitive end to the Satanic Roman rule. This motif can be seen also in the Beelzebul controversy (Mk 3:22f; Lk 11:14f), where Jesus’ exorcisms are carried out by the “finger of God” (Lk 11:20) and hence the Kingdom of God has been already announced in and through them.¹⁵

Those paralysed by evil spirits reflect the paralysed life of the Judeans due to the brutal rule of the Empire. These are set free by Jesus in his healings. The rich are asked to repent and be more egalitarian (Mk 10:17f), since they cannot be experiencing the Reign of God (Mk 10:23, 25) due to their collaboration in a system of exploitation. And finally Caesar is reduced to a tax collector (Mk 12:17), who deserves only a few currency coins and not the reverence of the people, which in turn is due only to God

In fact the Emperor is confronted with the servant kingship of Jesus; and ‘the Empire’ with the Kingdom of service.

¹³ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴ Pig was the emblem of the Roman Legion in Syria that had fought the war in Jerusalem in 66-70 AD. See Warren Carter, “Jesus’ healing stories: imperial critique and eschatological anticipations in Matthew’s gospel”, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 37 no 6 D 2010, 495.

¹⁵ Richard Horsley, “Jesus and empire”, *op.cit.*, 67.

Often we interpret the Gospel's statement "my Kingdom is not of this world", as the Kingdom is not a part of history that it is not part of the present time, but that it is beyond time. However, the words that Jesus says to Pilate are "my Kingdom is not the kingdom you know from this world, like Caesar's. My Kingdom is different. I am king, but another kind of king, a king who uses his power not to dominate, but to serve"... The type of power we understand, as the power of serving, is something that every Christian ought to practise. Jesus practised a serving power in opposition to an oppressive power. Therefore, he became a dangerous person, and therefore he was killed.¹⁶

The central Christian symbol of the cross was actually the Roman tool that stood for their brutality in curbing any opposition to 'the Empire'. But with the murder of Jesus on the cross, that is, in his 'being lifted up' and thereby drawing all people to himself (Jn 12:32, also 3:14; 8:28) 'the Empire' is challenged and the meaning of the cross is radically transformed into a symbol of salvation. Richard Horsley goes to the extent of saying that the crucifixion transformed "the power that was intended to intimidate and dominate into the power that inspired commitment and solidarity in forming an alternative social order."¹⁷ In fact Tom Thatcher reflects on the chiasmic structure of Jn 18:28-19:15 to conclude that the trial narrative depicts the triumph of Jesus over the brutality and injustice of the Roman rule.¹⁸

[The] crucifixion victims were forced to play a scripted role in the great tradition fable of imperial power, a power so great that it destroyed and dehumanized those who dared to resist. The Johannine Jesus, however, is 'dehumanized' by the cross only in the sense that his divine identity is completely exposed by

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, "Faith and politics in the popular movements: Christian commitment today", transl. Magnus Lundberg, *Svensk missionstidskrift*, 93 no 2 2005, 177.

¹⁷ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the powers: Conflict, covenant, and the hope of the poor*, (Minneapolis: Fortress), 2011, 199.

¹⁸ See Tom Thatcher, *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 2008.

everything that the Romans do to him, revealing the glory of God beneath the skin of a broken man—a glory that was revealed when and only because Christ chose to reveal it.¹⁹

The brutality of the Roman rule left the victims to seek refuge in apocalyptic consciousness, where the redeeming judgment of God against the oppressor is eagerly awaited. However, for the sake of survival, the victims would cooperate with the oppressor. But their covert protest would take ‘mythic’ forms. It is from this point of view that we understand Matthew’s portrayal of the world as under the control of the devil (Mt 4:8) and by implication the Roman Empire as the agent of the devil. Jesus casts out demons and sends them into the pigs (Mt 8:28-34). In fact the pig was the emblem of the Roman Legion in Syria that had fought the war in Jerusalem in 66-70 AD. Hence Jesus is depicted as defeating the Roman demonic rule and bringing in ‘salvation’ in the current demon possessed state of life.²⁰

The gospel depictions of this sort actually denote a unique dimension of Jesus’ ministry: He exposes the lie of *pax Romana*. ‘The Empire’ cannot co-exist with the true peace: a forced peace is a contradiction in terms. Seen from this angle, Jesus’ feeding the crowds of five and four thousand (Mt 14:13-21; Mt 15:32-39), or for that matter his healings become a remedying project set against the hunger and deprivation imposed on the masses by the Empire’s exploitative rule.²¹ Indeed John Dart looks at the Christmas narrative in Luke as the anti-type of the narrative of ‘the Empire’ according to which the ‘gospel’ was the supposed prosperity brought in by the Emperor Augustus, which made him the ‘saviour’, who brought ‘salvation to the whole world’ etc. As against this the Lucan Christmas narrative has angels bringing ‘good news’ to those who are favoured by God (Lk 2:14). And this happens at

¹⁹ Ibid. p.116.

²⁰ Warren Carter, “Jesus’ healing stories: imperial critique and eschatological anticipations in Matthew’s gospel”, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 37 no 6 D 2010, 495.

²¹ Ibid.

the birth of the 'Saviour' who is the Messiah and Lord.²² The peace he brings has nothing to do with *pax Romana*, which in turn was only a militarily imposed order. In other words Jesus was symbolically establishing the Reign of God, which was expected to come in full measure, and counter 'the Empire' in the most fundamental way.

The book of Revelation is increasingly being identified as a sort of guide that shows how the disciples of Jesus were to live under the rule of 'the Empire'.²³ The seeming contradictions in this book lead David R. Barr to use the category of irony to decipher this agenda of the book.²⁴ Read from this angle the book seems to make a mockery of 'the Empire'. Here are a few examples.²⁵

1. Jesus is said to be the "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5) – a kind of representative of God whose throne is mentioned in Rev 1:4. Jesus has a share in God's throne and the Laodiceans are invited to join him (Rev 3:21). The picture of a shared throne looks ironically strange; for, in a monarchy throne is the unshared monopoly of the emperor. Jesus is then called "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah" (Rev 5:5), who,

²² John Dart, "Up against Caesar: Jesus and Paul versus the empire", *Christian Century*, 122 no 3 F 8 2005, 20. The author refers to Richard Horsley's *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, op.cit., 2003.

²³ See J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010. The author holds that the book of revelation "is not a catalog of predictions about events that would take place two thousand years later," but rather "a projector that casts archetypal images of good and evil onto a cosmic screen", which primarily addresses the first century realities; but also anti-kingdom situations of any historical epoch. The point in all this is how those who profess their total allegiance to Jesus are to live in a world which demands loyalties to other powers which are anti-God (p.15).

²⁴ See David L. Barr, "John's ironic empire", *Interpretation*, 63 no 1 Ja 2009, p 20-30. Some such contradictions listed are: "while it seems to condemn wealth, it fantasizes about a new city with streets of gold; while it condemns Roman culture, it shares the cultural fascination of watching blood spectacles; while it stands firmly against empire, it imagines a new imperial system with Jesus as supreme ruler. p. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-30

because of his victory, is found worthy to open the scroll. But the lion is actually a Lamb (*arnion* = a lamb and not an adult sheep) that is standing as if slaughtered (Rev 5:6). The irony is: Jesus is neither a lion nor a lamb. He is a lion known as the slaughtered lamb; and such one is going to defeat the mighty 'beast' of 'the Empire.'

2. A second series of irony is found in Rev 19:11-16: the heavenly warrior mounted on a white horse. Though there is a mention of the final battle, in reality no battle scene is actually portrayed. The warrior has a sword jutting out from his mouth; and the nations are struck by it. His attire is a bloody robe. He is the 'king of kings'. But the actual battle is fought by angel Gabriel where Satan is defeated and expelled from heaven (Rev 12:7-10). But the victory won thereby is by "the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death" (Rev 12:11). Conquest, indeed sharing God's throne (Rev 3:21), involves (ironically) laying down one's life.

The irony brings to the fore what is going on behind what appears on the foreground. Although in John's historical world 'the Empire' is in control, in his story world, it is Jesus, who actually reigns. But the question is: how? In John's perception, his rule is through suffering and death!²⁶ Sharing in God's throne by such means now poses a challenge to the Roman throne which is a symbol of brutal power, exploitation and blasphemy.

3. In a further scene we have an army of 144,000 warriors (Rev 14:1-5). They are without blemish and are the first fruits. Incidentally both these categories are used in the context of sacrifice in Lev 2:14-3:2. The victory of these warriors which is already announced makes it clear that the dragon and its armies have already lost the fight. But the victory is achieved only through the self-sacrifice of the warriors (Rev 12:11); a victory, perhaps they are not aware of. They are like Isaac, who carried the wood for the sacrifice; not knowing who the sacrificial victim was (Gen 22:7). Indeed the Empire's violent autocracy is challenged by the 'rule by the faithful' for a thousand years, which is carried out not by worshipping the 'beast' (the Empire) but by imitating Jesus in his suffering and death (Rev 20:4).

²⁶ Ibid., 29.

4. While the power of 'the Empire' is exhibited in the religion of Emperor worship and military force (the legions), the power in John's perception seems to consist in resisting the imperial pretensions by being a witness to Jesus (Rev 1:9). In fact the Empire's centre of religio-political power in Palestine – the temple – is no more to be found in the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:22).

Jesus, the local religio-political leaders and the Temple

The Jerusalem Temple at Jesus' time was a centre of religio-political and economic activity. The temple was as much a place of worship as an instrument of control. The control was established mainly through the Judean priestly and aristocratic classes who paid huge tribute to the Persian Empire and later on to the Roman Empire. In fact as a sign of submission to and collaboration with Caesar, Herod had erected a great Roman imperial eagle above the gate of the temple.²⁷ In this context the 'cleansing of the temple' by Jesus assumes deep significance.

One can recall prophet Jeremiah, standing at the gate of the temple and calling out to the men of Judah; "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place" (Jer 7:3). The "robbers" in Jeremiah 7:11 are not a corrupt group of merchants in the temple but the nation of Israel. Israel itself was corrupt and was called to repentance. In a similar way Jesus too critiques the temple dynamics.²⁸ Indeed, Jesus, like Jeremiah, denounces the temple leaders. The pericope of cleansing the temple is flanked by two important episodes: in the first Jesus curses a fig tree which does not have any fruit on it (Mk 11:14). Mk 11:15-18 narrates the cleansing episode, and in Mk 11:20 they find the cursed fig tree. The already withered fig tree indicates that the destruction of the temple has already begun.²⁹

Although it would seem like Jesus is attacking the leaders of the temple and the merchants (Lk 19:45f), Jesus' action has a deeper meaning: it is

²⁷ Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and empire", op.cit., 56

²⁸ James M. Dawsey, "Confrontation in the Temple: Luke 19:45-20:47", Perspectives in Religious Studies, 11 no 2 Sum 1984, 157.

²⁹ Ira Brent Driggers, "The politics of divine presence: temple as locus of conflict in the gospel of Mark", Biblical Interpretation, 15 no 3 2007, 242.

the announcement of the coming of the Reign of God, for which the people of Israel longed (Lk 21: 29-33). His confrontations with the religious leaders depicted in Luke 19:45-20:47 is a clear attempt to draw their attention to the type of New Age that he was talking about, which certainly was different from a return of the legendary Davidic age.³⁰

The Temple dynamics were closely related to the Herodian rulers; especially Herod Antipas. A direct confrontation with him earned John the Baptist prison and eventually death. In this light we can trace a rather coded critique of Herod in Matthew 11:12 and Luke 16:16-18 for his violent opposition to the Kingdom movement inaugurated by Jesus. Although we find this in the text mentioned above, which in turn may or may not share the *sitz im Leben* of Jesus, it is not difficult to assume that Jesus himself would have used such codes in his preaching and teaching given the historical fact of Herod Antipas' brutality against all that the Reign of God stood for.³¹ But this did not mean that Jesus was spineless before Herod. Luke contrasts Herod's aggressive questioning

³⁰ James M. Dawsey, "Confrontation in the Temple: Luke 19:45-20:47", *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 11 no 2 Sum 1984, 159. In fact the following pattern in the confrontation scenes in Luke 19:45-20:47 can be seen: (1) The Sanhedrin leaders put forth a question to trap Jesus. (2) The purpose of the trap is to prove Jesus' message of the in-breaking kingdom is not credible. (3) Jesus' response leaves his opponents dumbfounded. (4) The accusers are shown to be wrong. *Ibid.*, 160. 163. 164. 165.

³¹ Matthew W. Bates, "Cryptic codes and a violent king: a new proposal for Matthew 11:12 and Luke 16:16-18", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 75 no 1 Ja 2013, 92. The author substantiates this proposal by pointing at "the presence of hidden transcripts in the near context of each passage—Matt 11:7-8 and Luke 16:17-18. *biazetai* in Matt 11:12 is passive, and the translation with coded paraphrase should run: 'From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven is experiencing brutal opposition [code: by people such as Antipas], and brutal men [code: like Antipas] are laying [violent] hands on it.' Meanwhile, Luke 16:16c is a continuative clause, *biazetai* is middle, and Luke 16:16-18 contains numerous coded referents: The law and the prophets were until John; from that time the kingdom of God is being proclaimed, and everyone [code: especially Antipas] is acting violently toward it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the law to fall [code: John was right in his criticism of Antipas for his flagrant violation of the law]. Everyone [code: such as Antipas] who divorces his wife [code: the Nabatean princess] and marries another [code: Herodias] commits adultery, and the one [code: Antipas] who marries a woman divorced by her husband [code: Herodias] commits adultery." *Ibid.*

and mockery (Lk 23:9, 11) with the strength of Jesus' character expressed in his silence. Herod is disappointed because he was curious to see Jesus and some miracle from him (Lk 23:8).³²

The accusation at the trial that Jesus threatened to destroy the temple may be linked to the issue of his Messiahship; although Jewish messianic depictions did not include such activity on the part of the Messiah. But in and through his actions in the Temple, Jesus certainly claimed some sort of special authority. His teaching about the Kingdom of God could have led some people to link it with the messianic claims. The high priest's question – "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mk 14:61), while reflecting Markan Christological assertion that Jesus was the Son of God, it nevertheless exposed the high priest's concern whether Jesus was making any messianic claims in and through his temple activity.³³

The gospel of Mark has a very interesting introductory comment in 1:14-15: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The timing of this coming to Galilee after John the Baptist was arrested is further highlighted by Mark, who informs us that the Herodians soon began to conspire with the Pharisees, on how to destroy Jesus (Mk 3:6). Herod's anxiety about Jesus is laid bare by Matthew already in the infancy narratives (Mt 2:3f).³⁴ But the narrative of the Pharisees and Herodians joining hands to finish off Jesus, despite not being friends otherwise, shows the depth of their anxiety in relation to Jesus. In fact on the way to the other side of the lake Jesus warns the disciples against the leaven of the *Pharisees and of Herod* (Mk 8:15). Surely once again these two have joined hands against Jesus. John 6:14f reports an intense 'political' activity following the feeding of the crowds on the other side of the sea

³² Mary E. Sullivan, "'That fox,' Herod: clues to Luke's inclusion of Herod in the passion narratives. Luke 13:31-33 and Acts 4:25-28", *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 16 no 2 Fall 1992, 8.

³³ Frank J. Matera, "The trial of Jesus: problems and proposals", *Interpretation*, 45 no 1 Ja 1991, 14-15.

³⁴ William H. Willmon, "Manger politics: 'The nativity story'", *Christian Century*, 123 no 26 Dec 26 2006, 8.

of Galilee (Herod's territory): the crowd recognises in Jesus the expected prophet and wants to make him their king.³⁵

Ira Brent Driggers offers an enlightening analysis of some of the Markan periscopes: Mk 1:1-15 depicts Jesus as the bearer of the Spirit, makes God's presence felt among people in a very unique way. Mk 1:21-3:35; 7:1-23 narrate some initial confrontations between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. These indeed speak of God's liberative presence within a political matrix. The author then focuses on the ironic climaxing of the conflict in the temple in Mk 11:12-12:12: First of all Markan clubbing together of Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, elders and priests as one single group that opposes and plots to kill Jesus (although historically they differ greatly with regard to their ideological commitments and even geographical locations) shows that they have a common interest in doing so; namely, guarding their self-interest.³⁶

In Mk 2:1-3:6 the conflict between Jesus and the opposing group centres round Jesus' authority, which is seen as a direct threat to theirs. This is because Jesus claims for himself some divine prerogatives: authority to forgive sins (Mk 2:1-12), and lordship over God's Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28; 3:1-6). Here, Mark is making a "political point through a highly theological portrait of Jesus."³⁷ The scribes accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub (Mk 3:22). Their accusation is based on the fact that Jesus opposes them who consider themselves as speaking for God; and therefore Jesus could not be acting by the power of God. But Jesus proves himself to be right by exercising a life-giving ministry (healing, exorcising etc.), and exposes the exploitative nature of functioning of the temple authorities (Mk 11 and 12).³⁸

Mark 11:27-12:12 contains the questioning of Jesus' authority by the Jewish leaders and his response. As a response to the query about his authority (11:27-33) Jesus narrates the parable of the dishonest workers, who tried to usurp the vineyard by killing the son of its owner (12:1-12). This echoes Is 5:1-7 – despite taking great care to grow a vineyard,

³⁵ Pierson Parker, "Jesus, John the Baptist, and the Herods, Perspectives in Religious Studies, 8 no 1 Spr 1981, 6-8.

³⁶ Ira Brent Driggers, *op.cit.*, 233-234.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

God's vineyard produced only wild grapes. In Mark's text it is now a conflict between God's Son and God's tenants. That Jesus is the bearer of God is made clear right at the beginning of Mark's gospel. And now the irony deepens as the leaders of the temple standing in the very presence of God (temple) are opposing the Son of God and thereby God himself.³⁹

The gospel of John has special (and very ironic) portrayals of Jesus' confrontation with Pilate and the Jewish religious authorities. Of these, the trial scenes are very special. The climax of this irony is expressed in terms of Pilate's mockery of 'the Jews' in Jn 19:15 – "Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.'" Read in the light of the Jewish faith tenet that no one but Yahweh was their King, which was prayed in the Passover hymn (*Nismât kol hay*) – this response from the chief priests (the religious leaders and that too at the Passover feast!) sounds utterly blasphemous; worse than a mere negation of their highest national aspiration.⁴⁰ But as we know, John's irony is not for its own sake. While exposing the political and religious failure of 'the Jews', it also brings out the true identity of Jesus. Pilate mocks 'the Jews' time and again – "behold your king" (Jn 19:14); he refuses to change the text of the title on the cross – it is not only that he said that he was the king of the Jews but actually he was (Jn 19:19-22)! But unknowingly he is affirming a great truth!⁴¹ Indeed, as Frank Matera puts it, "[I]n one of the great ironies of history, the false charges levelled against Jesus took on an

³⁹ Ibid., 243.244.245

⁴⁰ David Rensberger, "The politics of John: the trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 103 no 3 S 1984, 405-406. Also see Mavis M. Leung, "The Roman Empire and John's passion narrative in light of Jewish royal messianism", *Bibliotheca sacra*, 168 no 672 O-D 2011, 426-442.

⁴¹ David Rensberger, *Ibid.*, 406. Mavis M. Leung studies the Johannine passion narratives in seven scenes, which are oscillating between inside and outside of Pilate's praetorium. The total effect of using the title "king" on Jesus by Pilate and the soldiers is they unknowingly acknowledge the universal kingship of Jesus. *Ibid.*, 440. The seven scenes of Johannine passion narratives were identified originally by C.H. Dodd. Dodd named this oscillation "a two stage" performance – "a front stage and a back". See his *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 96.

unexpected meaning.” The mocking titles “King of the Jews” assumed a deep religious sense for Christians: “King of Israel”, “Messiah”, and “Son of God.”⁴²

The trial scenes portray another significant irony. Pilate asks Jesus “where are you from?” (Jn 19:9) Jesus’ silence prompts Pilate to speak of his own authority to execute or free Jesus. And now, Jesus responds – “You would have no authority over me at all if it had not been given to you from above” (Jn 19:11). The “above” refers to God. Therefore not even Caesar is the ultimate source of Pilate’s authority. This being the case, neither Pilate, nor Caesar has the ultimate authority over God’s people. Pilate is totally ignorant of this fact; because he is “of this world” and not “from above”. And yet ‘the Jews’ have handed Jesus over to him – the one who is ignorant and incompetent in exercising his authority given from above. God-given authority is being misused to murder the Son! And hence the sin of ‘the Jews’ who call God, Father, and yet have created this situation, is greater (Jn 19:11)! And Pilate? He is stripped of the ownership of his authority.⁴³ This is because Jesus lays down his life on his own free accord (Jn 10:18). He has entered into “the hour” appointed by his Father (Jn 12:27), and not because of Pilate’s authority.⁴⁴

Jesus and the Law

The ‘fulfilment of the Law’ and not its abolition is one of the central pillars of the Matthean narrative of the total praxis of Jesus (Mt 5:17f). From such a concern emerge his confrontations with the Jewish interpreters and teachers of the Law – the Scribes and the Pharisees. Mt 23:23 offers us one such example that shows how Jesus tried to put mercy and faith at the centre of religion, by critiquing a system that had made some of the peripheral customs such as tithing herbs look central.⁴⁵ The response of Jesus to the Law according to Matthew is therefore

⁴² Frank J. Matera, op.cit., 16.

⁴³ David Rensberger, op.cit., 409. 410

⁴⁴ Thomas W. Gillespie, “The trial of politics and religion”, *Ex auditu*, 2 1986, 70. The author follows here the argument of Raymond E. Brown in his *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 863, 892.

⁴⁵ Everett Falcóner Harrison, “The Son of God among the sons of men”, *Bibliotheca sacra*, 105 no 419 JI-S 1948, 309.

not essentially negative. In fulfilling the requirements of the Law, Jesus negates the category of 'rigour' and replaces it with that of 'radicality'. A disciple's righteousness has to surpass that of the Scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 5:20f). This is possible not with a greater rigour in following the law, but by radicalising it – by getting at the root or the spirit of the Law. In this process Jesus exercises a unique authority: "you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I tell you..." (Mt 5:21f). Within Matthew's Christological framework, such sayings reveal the unique (divine) identity of Jesus; for who else can replace or radicalize what was commanded by God through his prophet Moses?

Paul's understanding of the law as that which only multiplied sin (Rom 5:20f) should not be understood as a negative judgement against the law as such. As he clearly says, "law is holy... just... and good" (Rom 7,12). But the law cannot enable anyone to do what it prescribes. It is only the grace given in Jesus Christ that can do it (Rom 7:25). Seen from this angle what Paul says corresponds well with what the Matthean Jesus teaches about the law. Jesus did not condemn the Jewish law as such; but the way it was interpreted – replacing what was central with the peripheral. Jesus' attempt to reverse this phenomenon is not merely an ideological process but very much personal – he enables the disciples to live the radicalized interpretations of the law.

Was Jesus political in his praxis?

If 'politics' can be defined as the realm of power relations that affect the lives of a people then certainly, Jesus was 'political' in his praxis. According to Juan Segundo "the fact is that the concrete systematic oppression that Jesus confronted in his day did not appear to him as 'political' in our sense of the term; it showed up to him as 'religious' oppression. In real life this authority (the religious authority of the Scribes and Sadducees and Pharisees) was political..."⁴⁶ Jesus did struggle against this authority. Whether or not we agree with Segundo's opinion, we can certainly conclude that Jesus' response was as much political as it was religious/ spiritual.

⁴⁶ J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (New York: ORBIS, 1976), 95.

The difference between Jesus and any ancient or present day politician lies in their understanding of the human reality. In the perception of Jesus, human being is as much a historical (therefore political, economic, cultural, material, social etc.) as a spiritual being. The rule of 'the Empire' although is socio-political-economic, nevertheless it affects the 'spiritual' in its victims. Hence there cannot be a purely political or spiritual freedom without endangering the integrity of the human being. All these realms of human reality that are affected by 'the Empire' need to be addressed. The praxis of Jesus does precisely that. The mode of this addressing is not through a violent revolution (Zealots); neither through the rejection of the 'world' as a place of darkness (Essenes), nor through a legalistic following of the Torah (Pharisees). Alan Storkey characterizes the unique praxis of Jesus:

His principles and statecraft include the equality of all people (Jew and Gentile), peace, truth, integrity, freedom, weakness, reconciliation, forgiveness, stewardship, compassion, love, political tolerance, servanthood, political office as accountable before God, submission to the law of God, justice, and mercy, rather than preference for the powerful and wealthy, war, popularity, power, control, ownership, compulsion, domination, and a ruler unaccountable to and above the law.⁴⁷

In this context Ulrich Duchrow's interpretation of the "temptations of Jesus" as depicted in the gospel of Matthew (ch. 4) is particularly enlightening. Accordingly, Jesus' struggle against and victory over Satan is actually against the satanic manifestations of 'the Empire': wealth, power and idolatry of the Emperor and of the Empire and a consequent deviation from one true God.⁴⁸ Indeed, Jesus addressed socio-political phenomenon at its very root.

God as 'Father', and prayer for the coming of His Kingdom

For Jesus, the significance of the title "Father", among other things was also in the context of the "spiritual resistance to imperial pretensions."

⁴⁷ Alan Storkey. *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005, esp. chapters 7-9.

⁴⁸ Ulrich Duchrow, op.cit., 41-43.

Addressing God as “Father” and the announcement of his reign proclaimed “we have no king but you...”⁴⁹In the Jewish history and tradition, Yahweh alone could be the king over his people. It is for this reason that the judge Gideon could not agree to be the king (Jdg 8:22-23). And when people of Israel asked for a king, Yahweh ‘complained’ that “they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Sam 8:7). In the NT tradition then, the image of the “Father’s Kingdom” appears to be a ‘spiritual’ resistance to Roman imperial pretensions.⁵⁰Addressing God as ‘Father’ and ‘King’ in Matthew and Luke (originally from Q) further emphasizes this point. “Our Father ... let your kingdom come,” “I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth. . . .” (Matt 6:9-13//Luke 11:2-4) though reflect the early Christian liturgical context, nevertheless they have the resistance motif to the extent that they can be traced back to Jesus: In addressing God as the Father and King, such titles are effectively denied to the Roman Emperor.⁵¹Further, the kingdom in the gospel depiction is of the ‘Father’, it is not a kingdom of domination and violent power; but of love and reconciliation.

The coming of the Kingdom of the Father is intimately linked to Jesus’ preaching, miracles of healing and exorcising, his Sabbath controversies with the Jewish religious leaders, his valuing the faith of the non-Israelites, Samaritans and of women and to his table fellowship with the outcaste people of his time. If the Kingdom of the Father is a challenging alternative to ‘the Empire’, then Jesus’ words and deeds that announce and usher in the Father’s Kingdom have to be seen not merely as works of mercy (which they are) but much more, as a spiritual-political praxis, that is set

⁴⁹ Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Abba and ‘father’: Imperial theology and the Jesus traditions”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 111 no 4 Wint 1992, 628.

⁵⁰ In fact in the imperial ideology of kingship depicted in the Pss 2;110 and the charter of Davidic-Solomonic kingship (2 Sam 7; Ps 132), God is seen as supreme king who has set the human king into power. Dan 7 is God’s judgement against Hellenist rulers especially Antiochus IV Epiphanes for his exploitative and blasphemous reign. It is evident that in the Apocalyptic resistance theology of Daniel the three traditions of the OT – Torah, wisdom, and prophets – are merged. “One like Son of Man” (a humane face) replaces the beastly head of the Empire. See Ulrich Duchrow, *op.cit.*, 38. 40.

⁵¹ Mary Rose D’Angelo, *op.cit.*, 628-630.

against a system that discriminated people on the basis of class, race, religion and gender; a system that used religion to enslave and exploit ordinary people; a system that degraded women and children; and above all a system that deified human rulers.⁵²

The relevance of Jesus' stance for today and tomorrow

"...on the first Easter Monday evil still stalked the earth from Jerusalem to Gibraltar and beyond, and stalks it still."⁵³ If so, in what way Jesus' stance is relevant today? In the light of the faith tradition of the NT, we know that Christian hope is Eschatological that at once *includes* and transcends history. This is in no way to belittle history; but to speak about the vision and experience of future realities that empower us in our current engagement. For such a vision to be effective, one should first get 'converted' to Jesus' perspectives on God, power, authority, sin, human nature, freedom and historical engagement as depicted in the NT. His own struggles are historical but point beyond history. Knowledge of the Kingdom, indeed is a secret except to those whom it is revealed (Mt 13:11).

It is true that Jesus does not give a blue print of the new human society in terms of concrete structures and systems. He only suggests the parameters within which any such system or structure should work. They are non-violence, sharing, service, fraternity, justice, compassion, forgiveness, humility, and love.⁵⁴ The birth of such a society begins in history but is completed in the Eschaton. Such a vision brings together those interpretations that portray Jesus' ministry more as a social program⁵⁵ and those that speak about it more as a type of spiritual salvation.⁵⁶

⁵² Gregory A. Boyd, op.cit., 24.

⁵³ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), 659. Cited in Wesley S. Chiang, "To what extent does Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God provide a helpful basis for Christian socio-political thinking today?", *Evangelical Quarterly*, 83 no 4 O 2011, 311

⁵⁴ Wesley S. Chiang, *Ibid.*, 318, 319.

⁵⁵ For instance, John Howard Yoder. *The Politics of Jesus*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1994. Yoder focuses on Luke's gospel and especially on 4:14-21 in relation to Is 61:1-2.

⁵⁶ For instance, Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970.

And so “[W]hile we would be foolhardy to reduce Jesus’ ministry and identity merely to that of conflict with opposing powers, any account of his teaching concerning the kingdom of God that fails to consider concrete economic and political powers will invariably offer no more than a partial and therefore insufficient portrayal of the saving work of Christ.”⁵⁷

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler asserts: “A child that dies of hunger and its consequences today has been murdered.”⁵⁸ This is because, as Mahatma Gandhi had asserted – there is enough on this planet for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed! It is a profoundly ‘spiritual’ statement with concrete socio-political-economic referents. Jesus’ praxis has to be seen in the similar light. But many today are “ill-prepared to encounter a Jesus and a faith that integrates a serious commitment to the rule and promise of God with the everyday affairs of commerce, care for neighbor, active opposition to political and economic oppression, and the pursuit of justice and mercy for the broken.”⁵⁹

The type of praxis that Jesus undertook and its aim is well brought out in John’s gospel. First of all it was not a violent revolt against anyone as it is made clear in 18:36 that Jesus’ followers would not prevent his falling into the hands of ‘the Jews’. It means that the type of Jesus’ kingship is not like a typical one that was exercised by the Emperor. However, it exists in the world (Jn 17:14-18). The kingship of Jesus does exist in the world but the way it exists is very different from any other kingship. It has consequences for life here on earth; but its source is not of this world, nor are its ways of ‘ruling’.⁶⁰ It is precisely for this reason that it can critique the kingdoms and kingships of this world in the most fundamental ways.

⁵⁷ Mark Husbands, op.cit., 172.

⁵⁸ Jean Ziegler, *Das Imperium der Schande - Der Kampf gegen Armut und Unterdrückung*, (München, C. Bertelsmann, 2005). Cited in Ulrich Duchrow, op.cit., 42.

⁵⁹ Mark Husbands, “Wealth, lordless powers, and the rule of Christ”, Ex auditu, 27. 2011, 172.

⁶⁰ David Rensberger, op.cit., 408.

It is commonly held that historically, John's community was alienated from the mainstream society. Johannine categories such as "above" vs "below", "of the world" vs "not of the world", "light" vs "darkness" etc. emphasize this point. But this alienation should not be understood as a retreat from day-to-day life. Indeed that which is "from above" cannot but confront (and not ignore or escape from) that which is "from below". In fact such 'confrontations' abound in the Johannine corpus. But neither Jesus nor his servants fight a military battle. They rather remain in the world and become witnesses of truth before the rulers of this world.⁶¹ Such witnessing has been most relevant in all epochs of history, and even in our times.

What then is Jesus up to? He critiques the concrete un-Godly (anti-Kingdom) situations of the world which are brought about by the existence and the functioning of 'the Empire' and all its diverse manifestations and systems – international and local. But the source and perspectives of his critique are "not from this world"; they come from his Father; because he sees what the Father is doing and his own works (*erga*) are actually the works of the Father (Jn 5:36;8:38;9:4;10:25,32,37;14:10). The alternative that he offers is not another Empire of power and domination but of fraternity and service. But for that to come about the existing structures (religious, political, and all others) need to be radically critiqued and individuals have to experience a radical conversion of the heart.

To some, such a program may look at the most idealistic and Utopian and at worst simplistic; since it lacks concrete economic and political models to be put into practice. And yet it is true that 'the Empire' did feel concerned about it, not only during Jesus' times but even later. Hence Justin Martyr and the writer to Diognetus make it a special point to assure that Christians would not backtrack from playing their conventional citizen's roles in all realms of day-to-day life.⁶²

Indeed, apart from Christians, there have also been non-Christian visionaries and pioneers such as Mahatma Gandhi, who deeply believed in the programme of Jesus, and practiced it to the point of laying down their lives.

⁶¹ Ibid., 411.

⁶² Gerald Downing, "The politics of Jesus", *Modern Churchman*, ns 25 no 1 1982, 25

Jesus the stumbling block

It is curious to ask, whose trial was it ultimately? Was it of Jesus or was it of Caesar and the Palestinian Jewish rulers?

According to the Roman historian Suetonius some citizens of the Roman Empire, who were called emperor's friends, enjoyed a special relationship with the imperial family (See *Augustus* 35.1; 45.1; *Tiberius* 65.1; *Caligulus*, 19.2).⁶³ According to van Tilborg, a number of residents in Ephesus were honored as *philokaisar*.⁶⁴ Jesus calls his disciples his friends (Jn 15:13-16). At Jesus' trial Pilate faced the dilemma of being a friend either of the Roman emperor or of Jesus, the true King⁶⁵ by upholding justice. In this sense it is Pilate who stood the trial and was judged by his own choice. It was the same with the Jewish leaders – they had to choose either God or Caesar as their king. It is they who stood the trial and in their saying “we have no king but Caesar” passed the judgment on themselves. Jesus continues to be the ‘stumbling block’ even today. Those who ‘stumble against’ him have an encounter. This encounter demands a response – an option for or against him (Mt 12:30; Lk11:23).

Jesus continues to bear witness to the truth even in our day. A legitimate Government has a responsibility beyond satisfying every will and wish of the people. But the people can have recourse to God, who transcends them and their government. That is the truth. But the religious authorities and the Roman governor either do not know this or refuse to accept it. And hence both are made to stand the trial before the truth.⁶⁶ Perhaps if they were to realise the full import of Jn 8:38 (...know the truth and truth will set you free) they would have fared better in their trial. But John does not mention any such possibility. In contrast we have Peter and the apostles, who fared very well in a similar trial: “But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority’.” (Acts 5:29).

⁶³Cited in Mavis M. Leung, 439

⁶⁴ Sjef van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* (New York: Brill, 1996), 216. Cited in Mavis M. Leung, 439

⁶⁵ Cited in Mavis M. Leung, op.cit., 439.

⁶⁶ Thomas Gillepsie, op.cit., 73.

Is the confession of faith that Jesus is Lord political?

The early Christian confession that Jesus was Lord and Saviour clearly negated that role to anyone else – especially to Caesar. Hence such a confession was at once theological and political. Paul was explicit in this matter when he declared against the Roman imperial ideology that proclaimed many gods but one lord, Caesar Augustus, that there is only “one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:6).⁶⁷ In fact Paul’s opening and concluding confessions in his letter to the Romans are theological as well as political statements. In his confession that Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s promises to David, the words used such as - gospel, son of God, Lord, rule the nations, hope for the nations, faith, father, salvation, righteousness etc. are made to refer to Jesus Christ and not to Emperor Augustus as they were referred in the imperial ideology of Rome.⁶⁸

Today we need to realize the ‘political’ dimension of our spirituality and faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in the incarnate Word has to incarnate itself by being historically responsive to the concrete situations that manifest the satanic rule. That is the only way of protecting our faith from being a mere confession with our lips – indeed a lip service to the God of history.

Conclusion

Rom 8:21 proposes a grand vision about the final destiny of the entire creation: “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” The one, whose life and praxis is governed by such a vision, is able to hold together history and eschatology, political involvement and spirituality, and life one earth and the life eternal. Our reflection in this essay shows that in Jesus of Nazareth we have the example par excellence of such a vision and praxis. It emerges from him being the Son – the one who is willing to die for his Father’s kingdom. We are invited to share in his Sonship, by sharing his vision and praxis.

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⁶⁷ John E. Toews, “The politics of confession”, Direction, 38 no 1 Spr 2009, 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 8-9.

Jesus' Spirituality of Inclusion and Societal Concern

Varghese Abhilash

Jesus lived with his mother Mary and Josephs in a little village called Nazareth, in a marginal province of the Galilee of the Gentiles . He identified himself with the marginalized of the society. He did not exclude anyone from the society of God's dream which he shared through his intense and deep experience of God, whom he called *Abba*. He was hardly ever busy with the symbols of a formal religion like Sabbath, temples and sacrifices, but spent most of his time with the poor, the sinners, and the socially marginalized. With an unusual spiritual authority and gumption, he averred that God is to be worshipped not in religious places like Gerizim and Jerusalem, but in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23). All his teachings were unremitting in their demands. And the Gospels give us clear indications that he was finally done away with for his bitter diatribes against the oppressive religious and political authorities. Truly, Jesus did not come to give us a formal religion with its elaborate and intricate system of positive commandments and negative prohibitions. He came to unite people so that they can live in communion with one another and with God. He had table-fellowship with everyone without any discrimination. Unfortunately, Jesus' open table fellowship has today become our Eucharist which defines membership in terms of worthiness and unworthiness. The illiterate, simple and the guileless people like *Dalit Khristbhaktas* are considered 'unworthy' to receive the Blessed Sacrament which they believe in and adore so devoutly, whereas the 'baptized' people who could even be guilty of greed, hatred, injustice, and many such vices are considered 'worthy' to receive it. Has not the church become a gathering of members belonging to a particular club called the 'Catholics' rather than becoming a sign of God's kingdom where every person of good will and faith is welcome?

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Introductory observations

A careful and meditative perusal of the four Gospels gives us substantial insights into the fact that Jesus came to establish not a formal religion but the Reign of God. For Mark the evangelist it was patently obvious that Jesus came announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15). Luke presents Jesus' mission manifesto as one of announcing the good news to the poor, releasing the captives, freeing the oppressed, and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4:16-19). For Matthew, when John the Baptist sent his disciples to enquire with Jesus if he really were the expected Messiah, Jesus refers to the works he does (bringing wholesomeness and well-being in the lives of the sick, the suffering, and the poor: Mt 11:2-6; Lk 7:18-23) as the constituents of his messianic identity. John the evangelist announces that Jesus pitched his tent among us so that the masses who were victimized by thieves, bandits, and wolves may have abundant life (Jn 10:1-10), and ends his Gospel with Jesus asking Peter to feed and take care of his sheep (Jn 21:15-17). All these portrayals by the evangelists of the mission manifesto of Jesus are tinged with secular, social, economic, and political concerns. If Jesus was a religious reformer, he was equally a champion of human rights and a sentinel of social values.

During his public ministry, Jesus always taught that he preferred mercy to sacrifice (Mt 9:13; 12:7; cf. Amos 5:21-24) and announced that justice, mercy and faithfulness were more important than other legal niceties like external ritual cleanliness, tying phylacteries, and giving tithe for insignificant products like mint, dill, and cumin seeds (Mt 23; cf. Jer 7:22). He was hardly ever busy with the symbols of a formal religion like Sabbath, temples and sacrifices, but spent most of his time with the poor, the sinners, and the socially marginalized. With an unusual spiritual authority and gumption, he averred that God is to be worshipped not in religious places like Gerizim and Jerusalem, but in spirit and truth (Jn

4:23). All his teachings were unrelenting in their demands. And the Gospels give us clear indications that he was finally done away with for his bitter diatribes against the oppressive religious and political authorities. Truly, Jesus did not come to give us a formal religion with its elaborate and intricate system of positive commandments and negative prohibitions.

Ironically, the Christians have traditionally confined Jesus to the religion we call 'Christianity' and have conferred upon him the designation – "the founder" of the Christian religion. In the history of Christianity, Jesus has always been associated with and thought of in terms of a formal religion leaving Bruce Barton grieving: "He who cared nothing for ceremonies and forms was made the idol of formalism."¹ Even in this third millennium, the person and message of Jesus have been limited to a specific religious space and Jesus remains imprisoned within the fetters of a formal religion. This may be principally because the Bible and the biblical narratives were always thought of as religious materials. Perhaps it is time that we revisit this age-old, distorted and traditional belief of the Christians. R. A. Horsley observes:

It may thus be necessary to remind ourselves that, however religious it has become, the Bible is about the whole of life, political and economic as well as religious, material as well as spiritual. In the ancient Israelite-Jewish and Christian communities that produced biblical literature, life was not separated into different dimensions. Indeed, the presupposition in biblical literature appears to be that life cannot be so divided. There are no words or concepts in biblical literature that correspond to the modern "religion." When we interpret the Bible as something primarily or only religious, therefore, we are distorting it, reducing it to something less than literature concerned with the whole of life.²

It is imperative, therefore, that we become aware that the "biblical literature ... includes much material from popular traditions, narratives, prophecies, songs, and so forth, which originated from and express the

¹ B. Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, NY, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1980, 62.

² R. A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context*, NY, Crossroad, 1989, x.

concerns of poor and powerless people.”³ Therefore, today the biblical narratives need to be resurrected and liberated from the confines of a pre-understanding with which they were always read, understood, interpreted, and proclaimed. Similarly, Jesus too needs to be liberated from the purely religious halo he was always limited and confined to. He needs to be liberated from the confinement of a single formal religion because he belongs to all people of faith and good will irrespective of any religion. His gospel needs to be liberated because it was originally preached to all irrespective of their religious or ideological leanings and affiliations. And, his teaching too needs to be understood as not so much a ‘religious’ teaching (coming from a person of religion) as a spiritual and prophetic teaching meant for the socio-political well-being and wholesome development of the human person.⁴ Since every religious experience takes place in a given socio-political and historical context, such an experience is bound to include a vision not only for the religious but also for the social, economic, and political spheres of human life. Therefore,

In the biblical world (indeed in all traditional societies), the nice distinctions between the ‘religious’ and the ‘sociopolitical’ that obtain in our neatly compartmentalized secular society have little relevance. The religious realm overflows into the sociopolitical. The king is also the priest. The people are both an ethnic and a religious group. The prophet is a social reformer. A religious movement, like the one started by Jesus, will be heavy with political consequences. Indeed one of the most certain facts about Jesus is that he was ‘crucified under Pontius Pilate,’ that is, put to death by a Roman governor as a political rebel (Mk 15, 26).⁵

³ R. A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, xi.

⁴ According to M. Amaladoss, “Public Theology in a Multi-Religious Society,” in F. Wilfred, (ed.), *Theology to go Public*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2013, 8-97, “theology is faith seeking transformation of life in the world through understanding and empowerment.”

⁵ G. M. Soares-Prabhu, “The Kingdom of God: Jesus’ Vision of a New Society,” in D. S. Amalorpavadass, (ed.), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore, NBCLC, 1981, 579-608, 582.

A right understanding of the Jesus of the Gospels urges us that we liberate him from the fetters of a formal religion. Certainly Jesus was born a Jew and lived in a Jewish milieu. Nevertheless, the pre-ecclesial Jesus did not limit himself to any specific ethnic or religious group. He was a common man and made himself, his message, and his services available to all irrespective of people's religious and ethnic affiliations and moral worthiness (cf. Mk 1:38; Lk 4:42-44; Mt 4:23-25). It is not only the hapless, the hungry, and the sinful Jews who had a claim on his compassion and service (Mk 6:34-42; Mt 14:14-21; Lk 9:12-17; Lk 19:1-10; Jn 6:1-11), but also the non-Jewish Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30), the Roman centurion (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10), and the half pagan Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42). Therefore, in the ensuing pages we make an attempt at discovering this all-inclusive spirituality of Jesus as he lived it out during his public life and ministry and its implications for his followers.

A. The Spirituality of Jesus

1. Jesus' universalistic outlook

All the four canonical Gospels attest to the universalistic outlook of Jesus. For example, Matthew begins his Gospel by giving us the genealogy of Jesus Christ (1:1-17) which describes the human origin of Jesus. Jesus is the son of both David and Abraham. The birth of Jesus as also the son of Abraham fulfils God's promise to him that in one of his descendants *all the nations* will be blessed (Gen 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; cf. Mt 8:11)). The salvation to be brought by Jesus is more inclusive since Abraham was the "father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11) including Gentiles (Gal 3:7-9). Thus, Jesus' birth in the family of David and Abraham implies that salvation by Jesus is for both Jews (cf. Mt 10:6) and Gentiles, that is, all nations (cf. Mt 28:19). Similarly, the mention of two non-Jewish women in Jesus' genealogy, Rahab and Ruth, indicates that Jesus is very much tied to those considered as outcasts in the Jewish society. And, when it came to choosing his disciples, an outcast customs official (Levi the tax collector in Mk 2:13) and a rebel against the Roman Empire (Simon the Zealot in Lk 6:15) were included among his twelve close disciples. Besides, Jesus even had women as his close followers (Lk 8:1-2; 10:38-42).

In the days of his public life and ministry, Jesus' attitude towards the faith of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28) is paradigmatic of his inclusive spirituality. This passage demonstrates a stark contrast between a Gentile woman who did not have a religious tradition to her credit but a strong faith and the religious authorities who believed in religion and tradition but had no real faith (cf. 15:1-20). Here, Jesus is confronted by a non-Jewish woman who pleads for the healing of her daughter possessed by a demon. The term "Canaanite" refers to a Gentile inhabitant in Palestine and, therefore, a non-believer in Judaism. Though initially the Matthean Jesus dismisses her plea saying that his mission is limited to the Jewish people and that he will not give away the children's food to the dogs, this non-Jewish woman's faith challenges Jesus who is consequently transformed and praises her great faith. Similarly, in Mt 8: 5-13 Jesus is impressed by the faith of a centurion who was an officer in charge of one hundred soldiers. Despite being a Gentile, he believes in Jesus and begs him to heal his paralyzed servant. Like the leper in 8:2, the centurion also addresses Jesus as "Lord" (v. 6) emphasizing the lordship and authority of Jesus. Jesus' response to the exemplary faith of the centurion in vv. 10-12 implies that membership in God's kingdom is claimed not by race or by certain ritual practices, but by one's faith in Jesus.⁶

The greatest difficulty Jesus experienced during his public ministry was not from sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes, but from the religious leaders who would never buy his conviction that God was merciful and abounding in compassion (Joel 2:13b; Hos 11:8). They could never digest the truth that the tax collectors and prostitutes could obtain membership in God's Kingdom which they believed was reserved for the ritually pure and the law abiding Jews alone (Mk 7:1-23; Mt 15:1-20;

⁶ M. Amaladoss, "Public Theology in a Multi-Religious Society," in F. Wilfred, (ed.), *Theology to go Public*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2013, 80-97, 85 cites the following Biblical passages to substantiate the fact that the God of Christianity is inclusive. As Wisdom, God reaches out to all peoples from creation (Gen 1:1-31; Prov 8:24-32). John the evangelist tells us that Jesus the true light "enlightens everyone" (Jn 1:9). Paul tells us that God "will repay according to each one's deeds" (Rom 2:6) and that God "shows no partiality" (Rom 2:11). He is God not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles (Rom 3:29).

etc.). This does not mean that Jesus was averse to the rich and the influential. Despite Jesus' implacable opposition to the evils of greed and consumerism exhibited by the rich, Jesus still had a compassionate heart for them (Mk 10:21; Lk 19:1-10). While the rich Jewish tax collector Zacchaeus had the privilege of hosting Jesus in his house (Lk 19:1-10), Joseph of Arimathea (Mk 15:43) and Nicodemus (Jn 3:1) who were wealthy members of the Jewish aristocracy were Jesus' friends. Thus, the Gospels present Jesus as one who was totally free from all forms of caste, class, ethnic, and gender discriminations. This extraordinary openness towards all people resulted from his experience of God as the loving and merciful parent who loves all his children equally. Indeed, Jesus belongs not only to Christians but to all people of good will.

2. The place of women in the Gospels

Jewish women had absolutely no part in public life and were expected to remain unobserved in public. When a woman left her house, she was expected to wear a head-band to cover her head and a band to cover the chin so that she could not be recognized.⁷ Women were not recognized as official witnesses in Jewish society as the law pronounced them ineligible as witnesses, because it was concluded from Gen 18:15 that a woman was a liar.⁸ In the first century Judaism, women had a sociologically subordinate status to that of men. There were separate places for women in the temple and synagogues, and men had greater prerogatives, authority and responsibility in the religious, social and political spheres.⁹ From a religious point of view, a woman is inferior to a man and is not reckoned among the people summoned to pronounce benediction after a meal.¹⁰

⁷ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, (E. Tr. By F. H. and C. H. Cave), Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1969, 359.

⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, in *The Works of Josephus*, (E. Tr. & Ed. By A. M. W. Whiston), Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 2006, IV, viii, # 15 observes, "let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex, ..."

⁹ J. P. Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary*, NY, Paulist Press, 1992, 11-12.

¹⁰ J. Leipoldt, *Jesus und Paulus*, Leipzig, 1936, 37 cites an observation by R. Meyer: Neither the OT nor the Mishnah knows the feminine form of the Hebrew adjectives *hasid* (pious), *saddiq* (just), and *qados* (holy).

However, the Gospels redefine the women's position. First, though women did not usually figure in Jewish genealogies, Matthew mentions four women in the genealogy of Jesus. Tamar (Mt 1:3) had an irregular relationship with her father-in-law, Judah, and bore him twin sons (Gen 38). Rahab (Mt 1: 5) was a Canaanite prostitute in Jericho who did a favour to the Israelites by hiding two of their spies in her house to protect them from the king of Jericho which they came to invade (Joshua 2). Ruth was again a non-Israelite woman, a Moabite, who married Boaz by somewhat questionable means (Ruth 3) and became an ancestor of David. Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite (cf. 2 Sam 12:9-10), gave David his son Solomon through an adulterous relationship. The inclusion of these four women in the genealogy indicates that women who were considered inferior by Jewish tradition play an important role in the fulfillment of God's purpose. The inclusion of the so-called "sinful" women like Tamar and Bathsheba in the Infancy narratives in the First Gospel invites us to treat women with respect and dignity and to work relentlessly for their emancipation.

Again, women play a significant role in the public ministry of Jesus as he allows women to follow him (Mk 15:41; Lk 8:1-3). Simon's mother-in-law is healed by Jesus and she serves him and his disciples (Mk 1:29-31). The Marcan Jesus highlights the extraordinary faith of a woman with a haemorrhage (5:24-34) and of the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30). The widow who offers her whole living to the temple treasury (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4) and the woman who anoints Jesus (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Jn 12:1-8) are praised by Jesus. He also brings women on an equal footing with men before God (Mt 21:31-32). While the male disciples desert Jesus at his arrest, the women stay back and witness his crucifixion and burial (Mk 15:40-41, 47). Finally, though their testimony lacked value in the Jewish society, it is on the testimony of women that the gospel of resurrection has to be believed in (Mk 16:7). B. B. Thurston says: "History's most important message is given to those who could not give legal testimony in court in their own culture. Here is a Marcan irony with an important message for those who still question the legitimacy of women's ministry in the church."¹¹

¹¹ B. B. Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002, 188.

3. Jesus' attitude towards the "unworthy" people

Soon after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Luke the evangelist informs us, the good news of the birth of the Messiah was first communicated not to the Jewish religious leaders who were the spiritual elite residing in the holy city of Jerusalem, but to the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep by night (Lk 2:8-12). These shepherds in the vicinity of the village of Bethlehem were not more pious and virtuous than others. Looking after the sheep and goats was looked upon as a mean occupation in those days. According to a *Midrash* on Ps 23:2, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd."¹² The nature and character of these Palestinian shepherds is put very succinctly by Lucien Legrand:

The romantic image of the shepherd as a kind and simple soul does not correspond at all to the setting of Jesus' times. On the contrary, herdsman were known to have had a bad reputation. They were rough and tough characters who had to defend their flocks not only against the beasts of the desert but also against each other since the simplest way to account for a missing lamb was to steal one from the neighbor. They were accused of grazing their flocks in tilled land, suspected of stealing the produce of their herds... They had nothing to their spiritual credit but their needy and humiliated condition. Yet to them was first given the Good News of the birth of the Messiah (Lk 2:9-12).¹³

The Gospels usually do not portray Jesus as a Jewish religious leader who is particularly concerned with the prescriptions and practices of his Jewish religion. Rather, they present him as a compassionate spiritual leader whose priority and preference was always the well-being and wholeness of the religiously despised, economically impoverished, politically oppressed and socially marginalized people whom the Bible calls the *am ha aretz*, which is a Hebrew designation for the illiterate common people and which can be literally translated as "people of the land." They are peasants or rural residents as distinct from the ruling

¹²As cited by J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 311, n. 42.

¹³L. Legrand, *Christmas Then & Now: Christmas Meditations*, Mumbai, St Pauls, 2000, 41.

elite who dwell in the urban areas. These waifs and strays of the society acquired this derogatory designation for various religious reasons.¹⁴

First, this term described those who were lax in observing the prescription of tithe.¹⁵ Secondly, being a peasant community depending on livestock and agricultural farming, sometimes they had to violate the legal biblical requirements of abstaining from work on Sabbath. Thirdly, the Galilean peasants, on account of their geographic distance from the Jerusalem Temple and the priestly aristocracy, were not always aware of the various biblical laws, rules of purity, and the ritual and doctrinal demands promulgated by the priestly class.¹⁶ The Jewish rabbis considered them as sinners, unrighteous, and detestable.¹⁷ Thus the Galilean Jewish peasants were a class of people exploited not only by the Roman Empire, but also by the very people who were supposed to protect them – the religious leaders and the priestly class. It is these religiously and ritually impure and socially segregated people that Jesus of Nazareth frequently associates and dines with, because his God experience led him into social and political involvement. However, it is very difficult for us (trained in the western scholasticism of the Middle Ages) to understand that Jesus had a social concern! As G. M. Soares-Prabhu puts it:

It is significant too that theologians who find it so difficult to derive a new vision of society from the teachings of Jesus, seem to have little trouble in finding in them a ready-made model of

¹⁴ O. M. Hendricks, *The Universe Bends Toward Justice: Radical Reflections on the Bible, the Church, and the Body Politic*, Bangalore, TPI, 2011, 69-70.

¹⁵ The rabbinic writings have a rhetorical question: "Who is an *am ha aretz*?" And the answer is: "Anyone who does not tithe his property properly." As cited by A. Oppenheimer, *The 'Am Ha-Aretz*, (E. Tr. By I. H. Levine), Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1977, 76.

¹⁶ "The Galileans, partly owing to their distance from Jerusalem... were in general lax in their attitude towards strict orthodoxy and its demands." See L. E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, SBT 16, London, SCM Press, 1956, 26.

¹⁷ There was a saying that the law abiding pious Jews "should not marry the daughter of an *am ha aretz*, because they are detestable and their wives vermin, and of their daughters it is said, 'Cursed be he who lies with any kind of beast.'" As cited in A. Oppenheimer, *The 'Am Ha-Aretz*, (E. Tr. By I. H. Levine), Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1977, 173.

the church, finished down to its last little detail - where pope, bishop, male priest, deacon, primacy, infallibility and seven sacraments are all seen as “immediately and directly” instituted by Christ.¹⁸

4. Jesus’ attitude towards the Tax collectors and prostitutes

The job of collecting taxes from the local inhabitants for farm products and goods sold in the markets was given by the Roman Empire to wealthy foreigners who in turn hired indigenous officials to collect these taxes. Matthew, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, was such a tax collector (Mt 10:3) and Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector (Lk 19:1), both of whom believed in Jesus (Mt 21:32) and were probably baptized by John the Baptist (Lk 3:12-13). As they were free to collect extra taxes from the people to make personal profits, they engaged in theft, fraud and corruption and were despised by the general public.¹⁹ Their own Jewish neighbours also rejected them as they came into contact with Gentiles and consequently became ritually unclean. The collection of undue and exorbitant taxes by them for personal profits (which eventually made the farmers destitute and indebted to the tax collectors) and their ritual uncleanness were sufficient ground for these tax collectors to be counted among and branded as ‘sinners’ (cf. Mt 9:10-11; 11:19; Lk 5:30; Lk 15:1).

Jesus surprisingly reverses the fortunes of these so-called sinners by associating and dining with them (Mt 11:19; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 5:27-32) and by forgiving their sins (Lk 7:36-50; Lk 19:1-10; Jn 8:1-11). Jesus is even accused of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 11:19). In the rabbinic writings, the tax collectors are usually linked with robbers, murderers, and sinners.²⁰ And the ritually clean and observant Jews were

¹⁸ G. M. Soares-Prabhu, “The Kingdom of God: Jesus’ Vision of a New Society,” in *The Dharma of Jesus*, F. X. D’Sa, (ed.), NY, Orbis Books, 2003, 50-74, 51.

¹⁹ A. J. Saldarini, “Publicans,” in P. J. Achtemeier, (ed.), *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Bangalore, TPI, 1990, 841; J. R. Donahue, “Tax Collector,” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, NY, Doubleday, 1992, 337-38.

²⁰ Cited by J. R. Donahue, “Tax Collector,” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, NY, Doubleday, 1992, 337-8. In the Gospels, while they are regularly coupled with sinners, prostitutes and Gentiles, they are also identified as sinners. For example, whereas Mt 5:46 uses the term “publicans” (the equivalent word for “tax collectors”) Luke employs the term “sinners” (Lk 6:32).

forbidden from taking up the job of collecting tax since it was considered as one of the "despised trades."²¹ Therefore, when the self-righteous Pharisee contrasts himself with a tax collector and links him with thieves, rogues, and adulterers, Jesus declares that this sinful tax collector stands justified whereas the self-proclaimed religiously and ritually clean Pharisee stands condemned (Lk 18:9-14). For Jesus of Nazareth, doing good deeds makes one more favourable in the sight of God than living a pious life. As D. C. Allison has rightly said, "salvation is not restricted to those who have entered the ecclesiastical ark."²² The Parable of the Judgment of the Nations (Mt 25:31-46) refers to people who met Jesus without knowing it. It is not religious affiliation and faith confessions that make possible our encounter with God but doing good deeds.²³ Finally, Jesus springs a surprise by announcing that it is these tax collectors and prostitutes who will enter the Kingdom of God before the Jewish religious leaders (Mt 21:31).

His concern for these sinners and the marginalized is amply attested by his compassion and concern for the Samaritans (Lk 10:29-37), the widows (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 20:47-21:4; Lk 7:11-17), and the poor (Lk 6:20-23). On account of their dishonesty and wretchedness, they considered themselves incapable and unworthy of repentance. God's mercy always seemed tantalizingly out of their reach (cf. Lk 3:11-12; 19:8). But, his compassion enables them to undergo an amazing metamorphosis from condemned sinners to committed believers. However, his association with these social outcasts evokes the ire and opposition of his enemies (Mk 2:15; Mt 9:11; Lk 5:30; Lk 15:1), because "the neglected crowd's brokenness and sufferings were not overlooked by Jesus in the name of some temple religion or ethereal spirituality."²⁴

²¹ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, (E. Tr. By F. H. and C. H. Cave), London, 1969, 302-12.

²² D. C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 2009, 51.

²³ Prov 19:17 says, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full."

²⁴ S. Rayan, "With Us-With Whom-Is God?," in K. Kunnumpuram (ed.), *Jesus: The Relevance of his Person and Message for our Times*, vol. 1, Bandra, St Pauls, 2011, 157-95, 187-88.

They had failed to understand that Jesus' incarnation and baptism implied his necessary and inevitable plunge into the life experiences of those whom the society had pushed into the margins. According to A. Pieris, Jesus' baptism

... was not just a matter of going under the waters and coming up under the dove, but of placing himself into the hands of another prophetic leader and of committing himself to social movement already in progress. His immersion designated a lifestyle and exhibited a solidarity. It amounted to a choice about who he would be willing to live with, and what he would die for Jordan led to Calvary.²⁵

N. Perrin views Jesus' association with them as an "acted parable" of the good news of God's mercy to sinners and as an "anticipatory sitting at table in the kingdom of God".²⁶ His actions challenging the prevalent traditional religious and social conventions of his time (Mk 2:1-12; Mk 2:23-3:6) and his parables like the Two Debtors (Lk 7:41-43), the Two Sons (Mt 21:28-31), the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:3-7), the Lost Coin (Lk 15:8-10), and the Prodigal Son (Lk 11:15-32) reveal to us the unconditional love and forgiveness of his heavenly Father for the outcasts and wretched sinners.

5. Jesus' attitude towards the Samaritans

The Samaritans were yet another group hated by the orthodox and pious Jews, according to whom the Samaritans were foreigners (cf. Lk 17:18) and half pagans. They were a mixed Judaeo-Gentile race whom the Jews looked on with contempt.²⁷ The Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans (Jn 4:9). J. Jeremias observes that "the Samaritans were considered 'from the cradle' [i. e. always] as impure in a very high degree, and as causing impurity."²⁸ However, through the

²⁵ A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Mary Knoll, Orbis, 1988, 68.

²⁶ N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, NY, 1967, 107.

²⁷ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 354. In Lk 10:37, the lawyer avoids using the word 'Samaritan' and uses the circumlocution "The one who showed him mercy." This shows the burning hatred the Jews had for the Samaritans.

²⁸ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 357.

Parable of the Good Samaritan in Lk 10:25-37, Jesus demolishes the age-old myth that the Samaritans were lesser beings. In fact, the Parable establishes beyond doubt the fact that it is the Samaritan who proved himself nobler by taking care of the injured Jew while a Jewish priest and a Levite proved themselves lesser human beings by walking away. The Jewish priest and the Levite became less human precisely because they did not care for the "half dead" fellow Jew.²⁹ They became less human precisely because they fulfilled the requirements of a formal religion to remain ritually pure by keeping themselves away from a dead body. By asking the lawyer to imitate the example of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells him that holiness is not external ritual purity but compassion for the needy.

We read the Gospels frequently as 'good' Christians, but consistently refuse to believe in Jesus' words and repeatedly founder on the demands he makes on us. If we truly believe in Jesus' words, we will definitely associate freely and often with people whom the society considers bad. If we truly believe in Jesus, we will give them access to our church assemblies and will make available to them the sacramental body and blood of Jesus without laying on them the heavy yoke of fulfilling some ritual requirements to become ritually clean. Jesus' prognosis on the fate of his followers (e. g., Mt 5: 11) will then be fulfilled in the lives of those who practice such an inclusive spirituality.

Nevertheless, Jesus' attitude and behavior towards the sinners and his message for his listeners and interlocutors can never be interpreted as a total reversal of all established and time-honoured values. That is, he never preached that immorality, squandering wealth, theft, adultery, and levying undue and exorbitant taxes were permissible. He never idealized the behavior of the prodigal son who "squandered his property in dissolute living" (Lk 15:11 ff.), nor did he justify the immoral behavior of a sinful woman from the city (Lk 7:36 ff.). In short, his behavior towards the people living on the fringe of the society never displayed

²⁹According to the Law of Moses, a priest shall not defile himself by going near a dead body (Lev 21:1 & 11). In the story of the Good Samaritan in Lk 10:25-37, the priest had probably thought that the man who was waylaid by the bandits was dead (cf. v. 30: "leaving him half dead").

any “romantic predilection” for these people. But his intimate personal experience of the unconditional love and forgiveness of his Abba (Mt 5:43-48; Lk 6:36) moved him to make himself available and accessible to these whom the sanctimonious religious middle class had condemned. Jesus’ philosophy of life is: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mk 2:17; Lk 5:32; Mt 9:13).

6. Jesus’ opposition to Triumphalism

Undoubtedly, Christians of all mainline churches have traditionally projected Jesus as a triumphant Lord and universal King. This belief in Jesus as the Lord and King has consequently and sadly led the church into portraying Jesus and his credentials in terms of those of the earthly kings. Jesus is projected by both the believers and the official church as powerful, mighty, and triumphalistic, consequently leading the self-appointed representatives of Jesus (the bishops, priests and the men religious) to present themselves also as powerful, mighty, and triumphalistic. Unlike Mark the evangelist, we are so circumspect when it comes to Jesus’ humanity. That is, we see Jesus only as a mighty and an all-powerful Lord that we fail to see his humanity. We have emphasized his divinity to such an extent that Jesus almost ceases to be fully human. All this makes Albert Nolan lament: “Jesus is a much underrated man.”³⁰

However, a closer look at the person of Jesus presented to us by the four evangelists tells us an altogether different story. Material power, glory, and triumph have never been the credentials of the Son of Man. From the very beginning, the spirituality of Jesus was one of giving up and letting go. After giving up his own divinity (Phil 2), he chose to live in a little village called Nazareth in a marginal province of the Galilee of the Gentiles (Mt 4:15). Nazareth was a place from which nothing good could be expected to come (Jn 1:46) The region of Galilee was so insignificant and worthless that King Solomon had to sell twenty cities in Galilee in exchange for some timber (1 Kgs 9:10-14).

When requested by his brothers to go to Jerusalem on the feast of the Tabernacle and display his power and prove himself as the Messiah,

³⁰ A. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, Mumbai, St Pauls, 2010, 173

Jesus turns down their request (Jn 7:1-9). The content of his kingship was attending to tax collectors, speaking with prostitutes, forgiving sinners, touching the lepers, and so on (Mt 9:9-13; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 5:27-32; Lk 7:36-50; Jn 8:1-11; Lk 7:22; Mt 8:3). He exercised his kingship not by a show of power, not by ruling over others, but by attending to the needy and the neglected. The Roman soldier recognizes Jesus as God's Son not when Jesus did mighty deeds but when he annihilated himself by dying on the cross (Mk 15:39; Mt 27:54). The power of Jesus was his power to *renounce* power (cf. Mk 8:31 ff; Mt 16:21 ff; Lk 9:21 ff.). This sort of spirituality practiced by Jesus had nothing to do with the rituals and practices prescribed by any formal religion.

Yet another side of triumphalism in the church is the assumption that ours is the only true religion, the horrible consequence of which takes the form of aggressive efforts at proselitization by some individuals and denominations in order to "save souls." Mission entrusted to us by Jesus is never a crusade which is nothing short of an act of violence against existing cultures and religions. "Expansionist ambitions" are a product of religion with political and economic interests, not of spirituality which "emerges out of the pure well-springs of the Spirit."³¹ Nor is mission a conquest of the economically weak and the socially marginalized who, we wrongly assume, need to be won over for Jesus Christ by selling the gospel with the pie in the sky promise of life after death. Mission has nothing to do with exclusivism, numerical church growth, and triumphalism. Rather, mission is always an act of loving service as Jesus' noble example of washing his disciples' feet has taught us (Jn 13: 1-20). Jesus tells Peter three times that the only meaningful way by which he could prove his love for Jesus was by taking care of his sheep (Jn 21:15-19).

Further, Jesus asks us to be the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13). Salt is ordinary and inconspicuous. Nevertheless, a pinch of salt is effective out of all proportion to its amount. Therefore, if they do not lose their saltiness, the poor, the unseen, the despised and the minority Christian community can have a greater purifying effect amidst the corruption and darkness of this world. We don't need to bring others into our religious

³¹ S. Painadath, "Dialectics between Spirituality and Religion," in *Jeevadhara*, Nov-Dec., 2012, 333-52, 343.

tradition, because Jesus warns us that salvation is not limited to those coming in the line of a certain tradition, but is offered to all who seek a renewal of life and bear fruit (Mt 3:8-9; 21:43). Salvation is not the prerogative and privilege of people belonging to a particular religious group. Rather, blessedness and the kingdom of God have been announced to the poor and the oppressed without requiring of them any allegiance to a particular religion. Salvation belongs to those who practice justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mt 23:23) and to those who have shared their riches with the poor (Mt 19:21; 25:31-46).

7. Jesus as the good Shepherd

One of the images that the Old Testament paints of God is that of a shepherd (For example, Ps 23). Prophet Ezekiel says that God as the good shepherd seeks out his sheep and rescues them, brings back the strayed ones, feeds them, binds up the injured, and strengthens the weak (Ezek 34:11-19). God also condemns the false shepherds for their failure to feed their sheep, to strengthen the weak, and to heal the sick and the injured. He castigates them for their failure to seek out the scattered and the lost that eventually became food for the wild animals (Ezek 34:1-6). The mission of a true shepherd is always to take care of and protect the sheep from impending danger even at the risk of his own life. This is very clear in the life and mission of David. When Saul tells David that he wouldn't be able to fight against the mighty Goliath the Philistine, David replies:

Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears (1 Sam 17:34-36, NRSV).

David's reply to Saul gives us the essence of what it means to be a shepherd. For a good and true shepherd, giving up life for his sheep is neither an option nor an alternative, but the very essence and nature of being a shepherd. Jesus presents himself, especially in the Gospel of John, as the good shepherd (Jn 10:1-18) and invites us to similarly shepherd the flock entrusted to our care (Jn 21:15-17). He defines a good shepherd as the one who lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 15:11,

15, 17), and thus indicates to his disciples the destiny of every true shepherd even though our instinct of self-preservation is incompatible with this demand for self-sacrifice. The content of the spirituality of Jesus the good shepherd is letting go and giving up his life for the well-being of others. The greatest form of love according to Jesus is one's willingness to lay down one's life for his friends (Jn 15:13). This laying down of one's life for one's sheep is the surest credential of a true shepherd.

B. Implications and Challenges for us Today

1. Spirituality of non-discrimination

If the guiding light and principle of the spirituality of Jesus was his mystical union with the Father and his prophetic selfless love for his fellow humans, concretely found expressed in his compassion for and openness to all people of good will irrespective of their caste, creed, and race, the followers of this man from Nazareth too need to be guided by the same principle to be able to truly claim to be Christians. Jesus experienced God not as "holy", that is, as one who is separated from the "profane" world, and demanding that his people also be separated from the profane and from the ritually "unholy" people. Jesus' compassionate dealings with the marginalized and those considered as "pagans" by the Jews shows that he experienced God as a merciful parent. In the words of G. M. Soares-Prabhu:

Jesus experienced God as "merciful", a God who reaches out in forgiveness and love to all people, across all the lines of separation that we like to draw (Jew/gentile, righteous/sinner, clean caste/*dalit*), and who summons his people to a similar compassion, that is, to an effective love that will reach out beyond the bonds of kinship, clan, and race to the outsider, the undeserving, the enemy (Lk 6:32-36).³²

³² G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for *Dalit* Christians in India Today," in F. X. D'Sa (ed.), *The Dharma of Jesus*, 117-32, 126.

To be a Christian is not merely following a formal religion but participating in the life of people who have even been traditionally hostile to us (like the Greek and Jew, slave and free, circumcised and uncircumcised, etc.). Being a good Christian implies that we break down barriers that divide God's people created in his own image (Gen 1:26-27; cf. Jn 17:20-21). A very disturbing form of division and discrimination that can be noticed today is a form of "untouchability" still practiced in the church during Eucharistic celebrations in some parts of our country.

The Eucharist has always carried the memory of Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners... The Eucharistic memorial of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is also the celebration of the community which that life, death and resurrection create. To celebrate the Eucharist while breaking up its participants into caste groups ... by consigning them to special parts of the church or to separate places in a communion queue, is therefore to parody the Eucharist... What can it mean to speak of the "real presence" of Jesus in a situation... where the community that he founded by laying down his life as a ransom for all, is being fragmented and mocked? How is it that we who would be "scandalized" to see a priest celebrating mass without an alb, can comfortably tolerate or even take part in utterly scandalous Eucharists like these?³³

St Paul too speaks in a similar vein: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27). The same sentiment reverberates in Col 3:11: "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all." When Peter refused to eat with the Gentile Christians in Antioch for fear of the circumcised Jewish Christians and out of respect for the traditional Jewish practice of distancing themselves from the "polluting" Gentiles, Paul "opposed him to his face" (Gal 2:11-14). G. Bornkamm says:

³³ G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," 128.

The natural divisions between friend and foe, between Jew and Samaritan, neighbour and stranger, Pharisee and tax collector, righteous and unrighteous are certainly everywhere presupposed, and not ignored; but love penetrates these frontiers for God's sake and for our brother's sake, for whom I have a responsibility from which God does not release me.³⁴

The upshot of the preceding discussion is that our Christian faith demands of us that we get rid of all human made distinctions of gender, caste and creed and imitate Jesus who engaged in a conversation with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4), appreciated the faith of the Roman centurion (Mt 8:5-13), allowed a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years to touch his cloak (Mk 5:24-28), and allowed himself to be challenged and transformed by the Canaanite woman who was considered a pagan (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). This sort of demeanour on the part of Jesus toward the marginalized in the society led to "a bouleversement of the value scale."³⁵ Until now the church seems to have not really understood Jesus rightly and, as observed by R. T. France, "even two thousand years later the Church has still not fully appreciated what a revolutionary business it is to follow Jesus."³⁶ Shall we (bishops, priests, and religious) now begin to make efforts to understand the Jesus of the Gospels and gather the courage to work towards eradicating caste distinctions and other discriminations shamelessly existing in the Church in our country?

This leads us to a consideration of another unique group of people emerging today as part of the Indian ecclesia. For the last fifteen years, there has been a unique and unusual phenomenon in some parts of North India – the evolution of a community known as the *Khristbhaktas* (devotees of Christ), the cradle of which is Varanasi. By religion, most of them are Hindus. And, economically and socially, most of them are

³⁴ G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1960, 115.

³⁵ It is a phrase used by Helmut Gollwitzer to describe the effect of Jesus' revolutionary teaching and praxis. See H. Gollwitzer, "Liberation in History," *Interpretation* 28 (1974) 411.

³⁶ R. T. France, *Divine Government: God's Kingship in the Gospel of Mark*, London, SPCK, 1990, 49.

Dalits (broken and marginalized). They believe in Jesus, accept him as their Lord, regularly visit Christian spiritual centres to listen to the Word of God, actively participate in the Holy Mass on Sundays, devoutly take part in the Way of the Cross during Lent, and adore the Blessed Sacrament with supreme piety and devotion. They truly believe in Jesus as their Lord, and have surrendered their whole life to him. However, sad to say, they are forbidden to receive the Blessed Sacrament during the Holy Mass in which they participate so devoutly. The Eucharistic assembly in the church divides people, the opposite of what it was intended by Jesus to achieve!

In this context, it is necessary and important to calculate and assess carefully how much of the original spirit of Jesus has been lost in the church over the centuries. The Eucharist of today has its origin in a series of meals Jesus used to often have in the company of his disciples to which he also invited tax collectors and sinners. His meals were open table fellowship uniting people irrespective of caste, creed, and moral worthiness. Unfortunately, Jesus' open table fellowship has today become our Eucharist which defines membership in terms of worthiness and unworthiness. These illiterate, simple and the guileless *Dalit Khristbhaktas* are 'unworthy' in our eyes to receive the Blessed Sacrament which they believe in and adore so devoutly, whereas the 'baptized' people who could even be guilty of greed, hatred, injustice, and many such vices are considered 'worthy' to receive it. Has not the church become a gathering of members belonging to a particular club called the 'Catholics' rather than becoming a sign of God's kingdom where every person of good will and faith is welcome?

2. Not so much to worship as to follow Jesus

Our call to Christian discipleship is not so much to worship Jesus as to follow him. G. Bornkamm laments: "By the events of Easter and the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, he who proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God... became the one proclaimed; the one who called to faith became the content of faith... To many this process appears as Christianity's great fall."³⁷ But Jesus

³⁷ G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 188.

was very clear that he was only the Way to the Father who alone needs to be worshipped in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23; cf. Mt 23:9). Therefore, he cried out, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). Also, the only commandment Jesus has given us is the one to love (Jn 13:34; 15:12) and the only way to become his disciples is by loving (Jn 13:35). Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus when he says, "... love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:10) and that love is more than faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13).

These teachings undoubtedly tell us that we can become his followers only by fulfilling the commandment to love and by a process of self-abnegation even unto death. This love is not the expression of a pious sentiment. It has to be shown in the most concrete and material way (1 Jn 3:17-18). It means that, like Jesus, we too reach out to the badly beaten stranger as did the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), to share food and clothing (Mt 25:31-46), to visit prisoners (Heb 13:3), to opt for the poor and the oppressed (Lk 4:16-20; Acts 4:32-35), to be patient, kind and magnanimous (1 Cor 13:3-7), and to love and care for the enemies (Mt 5:43-48; Lk 6:27-36). And, this is the true meaning of religion proclaimed by the Jewish-Christian Scriptures (Jas 1:27; Deut 24:17-22).³⁸ And this is how Jesus related with the society of his time. The truth about Jesus is that he was not a temple priest fulfilling the legal and ritual requirements of a formal religion, but one who lived his life in solidarity with the pagans (e. g., the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman) and the marginalized in Jewish society (e. g., Zacchaeus, the woman caught in adultery, and the hungry crowds) and worked for their emancipation.

Conclusion

Jesus' openness to and close association with the people of his time became the principal cause of various conflicts and opposition he

³⁸ S. Galilea, *The Beatitudes: To Evangelize as Jesus did*, (E. tr. By R. R. Barr), NY, Orbis Books, 1984, 17 argues that it is precisely Jesus' work of deliverance of the poor and the afflicted from their misery that constitutes the credentials and identity of Jesus (cf. Mt 11:2-6; Lk 7:18-23).

experienced from the religious and political authorities. They took offence at his eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:9-13; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 5:27-32). After his eschatological discourse in Mt 23-25 where he had pronounced a scathing indictment of the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, the chief priests and the elders of the people conspire to arrest Jesus (Mt 26:3-4). After he cleansed the temple of the money changers and salesmen who exploited the poor in connivance with the temple priests, the chief priests and the scribes looked for a way to kill him (Mt 21:12-17; Mk 11:15-18; Lk 19:45-47). When he healed a man with a withered hand on a Sabbath thus breaking a human made law, the Pharisees conspired with the Herodians to destroy him (Mk 3:1-6; Mt 12:9-14; Lk 6:6-11). When a sinful woman from the city anointed and kissed Jesus' feet as a sincere expression of her wish and determination to repent and mend her ways, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dine with him took offence at it (Lk 7:36 ff.).

Examples abound where Jesus' intimate personal experience of his heavenly Father led him to live a spirituality contrary to the one propagated by the religious and priestly aristocracy. As a consequence, he was sentenced by a civil court and was awarded a sentence reserved usually for subversives. The root cause of the religious and social ostracism Jesus was subjected to lay in the fact that the God he proclaimed was inconsistent with the distorted image of God believed in by a decadent official religious establishment whose God was formalistic, legalistic, ritualistic, ethnic and sectarian. The long and short of the discussion is that the practice of a truly Christian spirituality resulting from a genuine experience of God will necessarily lead us to dissonance and conflict with the established traditions and religious practices.

To truly follow the Jesus of the Gospels, it is imperative that we get rid of religious exclusivism, aggressive and provocative display of triumphalism, and tall claims of absolute certainty for ourselves and a concomitant disdain for others. A true Christian needs to dialogue with people of all faiths because the Spirit of God speaks through every religion and it always blows where it wills (Jn 3:8).³⁹ For Jesus, "No tradition

³⁹ "God's saving action ... never prescind from the Christ-event, in which it finds its highest historical density. Yet the action of the Word of God is not

was too sacred to be questioned. No authority was too great to be contradicted. No assumption was too fundamental to be changed."⁴⁰ Jesus differed radically from everybody else and, therefore, he was rejected. He was rejected because he did not subscribe to the common assumption that group conformity is the only criterion of truth.

Following this man from Nazareth in Galilee could probably land us in isolation from and rejection by the majority in the church. The most profound loneliness of Jesus was his "pastoral loneliness" which arose both from his disciples' misunderstanding of him and of his message and from their consequent rejection and betrayal of him. In our life too, if we have never experienced opposition and isolation, if the majority is always comfortable with us, if we always have a large following, and if we are never subjected to a "pastoral loneliness" where we feel misunderstood and abandoned even by those whom we care for (cf. Mk 3:21), then it is a clear indication that we probably have not yet become true followers of Jesus. The spirituality and life-style of a true follower of Jesus always make people uncomfortable with the consequence that they will in all probability desert him/her and flee as it happened in the life of Jesus (cf. Mt 26:56).

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constrained by its historically becoming human in Jesus Christ; nor is the Spirit's work in history limited to its outpouring upon the world by the risen and exalted Christ. The mediation of God's saving grace to humanity takes on different dimensions which need to be combined and integrated." See J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1997, 316.

⁴⁰ A. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 173.

Jesus' Radical Option for Women: A Feminist Critical Reading of the Bent Woman in Luke 13: 10-17

Pauline Chakkalakal

Jesus had a special concern for women. In his presence they felt recognized, accepted and loved. The Gospels present Jesus as accepting women and their partnership in his ministry in an astonishing manner which contrasts with his Jewish contemporaries. Far from using his maleness to dominate and domesticate women, he is seen as one who acknowledges and upholds their human dignity as human persons and their right to discipleship. The author attempts to interpret the Lukan narrative of the healing of a bent woman on the Sabbath from the perspective of the experience of women in our male-dominated society and Church in order to bring out the relevance of Jesus' attitude and action that can challenge both men and women to create society of equals and a Church of equal discipleship.

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Introduction

Jesus appears on the scene at a time when people were oppressed both by the local and religio-political leaders and the Roman imperial authorities. It was a period noted for its armed resistance to the foreign powers, particularly in Galilee, which was known for its political revolutionaries like Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), and its support for the Zealot movement.¹ Although he did not belong to any militant group, the impact of Jesus was such that it had serious practical consequences and implications for the manner in which the society of his time was organized and the religio-political governance was made.² Because of his preferential option for the poor and association with the marginalized, Jesus' very presence represented a threat to the religious and political powers of his time.

Concerning his attitude towards women, Jesus is presented as accepting women and their partnership in his ministry in an astonishing manner which contrasts with his Jewish contemporaries.³ Far from using his maleness to dominate and domesticate women, he is seen as one who acknowledges and upholds their human dignity and right to discipleship (e.g., Mk 15: 40-41; Mt 27: 55-56; Lk 8:1-3; Jn 12: 1-7; 20:1-18). Against

¹ Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985); see also Geza Vermes, *Jesus, the Jew, A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1980).

² Juan Luis Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 71-85. See also Sean Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2005).

³ It is said that a pious Jew thanked God daily for not having been born a Gentile, a woman or a slave. See ET in A. L. Williams, ed., *Tractate Berakoth: Mishna and Tosephta* (London: SPCK, 1921), p. 84. For Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's comments on this, see *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad & London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 217-218. A clear picture of the Law in the OT & in Judaism, see Francis Pereira, *Gripped by God in Christ: The Mind and Heart of St. Paul* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1991), esp. pp. 47-55.

the background of the first century patriarchal culture, Jesus' behaviour towards women is so extraordinary that New Testament scholar Moule cites it as evidence of scriptural authenticity.⁴

Methodology: By combining the tools of exegesis with strategies of feminist hermeneutics, this study makes a modest attempt to unravel the Lukan portrait of Jesus and women, Jesus' healing of the bent woman on the Sabbath, as well as his message for the 'bent women' of today. Feminist hermeneutical principles consist of "a hermeneutics of experience, domination and social location, suspicion, critical evaluation, creative imagination, remembering and reconstruction, and transformative action for change."⁵ We need to accentuate that women's experience includes the biological and cultural experiences of being female and the feminist experience that calls for equality and inclusiveness. Underlining the experience-based and struggle-centred nature of feminist hermeneutics, Pearl Drego says, "Women's lives are the 'text' for interpretation and elucidation, compassion or celebration."⁶ As a constructive and holistic enterprise, feminist theological and biblical studies seek to develop a dialogic and participatory process of doing theology.

With these introductory remarks, we shall delve into the subject matter of this essay, in view of exploring the liberative characteristics of the text. Consequentially, like the bent woman and the crowd in the Lukan

⁴ CFD Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (Naperville, III: Alice R. Allenson Co., 1967), p. 65. For further reading on Jesus' appreciation of and interaction with women, see articles by Shalini Mulackal, Evelyn Monteiro, Kochurani Abraham, Pearl Drego & Alice Erani in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XL, No.237 (May 2010). The whole issue deals with "Jesus and Women".

⁵ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p.167. For further study on feminist hermeneutics and theology, see Pauline Chakkalakal, *Discipleship – A Space for Women's Leadership? A Feminist Theological Critique* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2004), Chapter IV.

⁶ Pearl Drego, "Women Theologizing: Beginnings of Feminist Theologies and their Concerns," *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XL, No. 237 (May 2010), p. 238; full text, pp. 232-252.

episode, we will experience the joy of integral liberation and deepen our attitude of gratitude. A brief survey of the situation of women in Jewish society is relevant as it helps us appreciate Jesus' radical option for women. Similarly, an overview of the position and depiction of women in Luke would provide deeper insights into the text under investigation. In the process we learn the art of listening to the *silent* and *silenced* voices within the text and respond with passion and compassion to the issues raised.

1. Women in Jewish Society

A highly patriarchal Jewish society assigned to women a second class citizenship, a status of subjection to male members of the family as portrayed in biblical texts. The Bible, written from the socio-cultural and religious perspectives of male authors, as well as its interpretations, has legitimized women's subordination down the ages. Some examples are cited below:

Woman treated as man's property

The Ten Commandments include woman among the objects owned by man: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house, you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maid servant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's" (Ex 20:17; cf. Deut 5:17-21). The man could treat her in the same way a master treated his slave or a king his subject. Domestic violence that cuts across economic and educational status in our society is based on the notion of women as property, often reduced to commodities controlled by men in the family.⁷

Woman deprived of inheritance right

A daughter could have access to her father's property only if there were no male heirs: "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass to his daughter" (Num 27:8). In this context, the courage of the five daughters of Zelophehad is admirable (Num 27:1-11). They stood before Moses and the entire congregation (v. 2),

⁷ For an elaborate view, see Shalini Mulackal, "Violence against Women and a Jesuan Response," *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XLI, No. 243 (May 2011), pp. 217-232. See also other thought-provoking articles on Violence in the same issue.

challenging the Mosaic law of inheritance (vv.3-4). A parallel can be drawn between this law of inheritance and the law of Manu.⁸ Both have strong patriarchal roots that make women dependent on the dominant males in their families.

A case study by Gabriel on Property Rights⁹ further reveals the biased patriarchal agenda. He observes that in the graded hierarchical structure of the family, the female members are below the males: father on top of the hierarchical ladder, followed by his son. In his critique of the Syrian Christian practices with regard to landed property, Gabriel maintains that these practices, to a great extent, have their roots in the Old Testament laws. His sharp criticism is worth contemplating:

Their traditions show that their social and cultural practices dominate over the Gospel message. Thus their practices are culturally determined rather than being biblically rooted or theologically and ethically justified. We see that, after the victory of Mary Roy's case, the Supreme Court's judgement was furiously debated and opposed. It is very sad to see that even when the judiciary stood for the fundamental rights of women, the Church establishment stood for the oppressive and patriarchal values...¹⁰

Laws of ritual purity

Laws concerning purification of women stigmatized them as unclean during their periods of menstruation (Lev 15:19-30) and child birth (Lev 12:1-5). A rigid purification was also prescribed for everything touched by the woman and everyone who touched her (cf. Lev 15:19-31, 20-18). To add insult to injury, the sin offering was required of her both after the menstrual period and child birth (Lev 15:30). This concept, that

⁸See the scholarly article of Ravi Tiwari, "Women in Manu," in Prasanna Kumari, ed., *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis* (Chennai: Gurukul, 1999), pp. 118-119.

⁹K. J. Gabriel, "Property Rights: Women's Rights Too!," in Elizabeth Joy, ed., *Lived Realities: Faith Reflections on Gender Justice* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1999), pp. 65-76.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 76.

menstruation and childbirth cause 'uncleanness' persisted into the patristic and later church, to the detriment of women's ministry and leadership roles.¹¹ In fact, all ancient cultures share similar ideas on purity and pollution. As Robinson points out, "The principle of purity and impurity pervades the Indian culture and it partly explains the hierarchy of castes in India..."¹² In brief, the woman was culturally, socially and physically ostracized.

Women denied of education

A study by J. Jeremias¹³ reveals schools were only meant for boys. A woman was educated merely in household tasks that would enable her to serve man's needs. Describing the situation, Pallares says: "It was commonly held that women were incapable of observing the commandments, in as much as they were considered to lack the capacity for schooling (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33 b)..."¹⁴

The injunction prohibiting women to study Torah creates the paradoxical result that "on the one hand, since the study of Torah is always meritorious, women are rewarded for its study (though to a lesser degree than men since they are not divinely commanded to do so) and, on the other, they are in practice discouraged from such study."¹⁵ It represents an ideology that marriage and child rearing are women's appropriate sphere of activity. Once again we notice a striking similarity between Jewish law and Manu-Smriti.¹⁶

¹¹ See for example the attitude of Church Fathers and Reformers in R. B. Edwards, *The Case For Women's Ministry* (London: SPCK, 1989).

¹² Gnana Robinson, "Purity and Pollution: A Theological Perspective," in Prasanna Kumari, ed., *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, pp. 316-330.

¹³ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, translated by F. H. & C. H. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 374/384.

¹⁴ Jose C. Pallares, *A Poor Man Called Jesus: Reflections on the Gospel of Mark* (Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1986), p. 53.

¹⁵ Edith Wyschogrod, "Women in Judaism: Toward a Universal Humanity," in Regina Coll, ed., *Women and Religion* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 84.

¹⁶ To understand the link between religious laws and culture, see my book *Discipleship – A Space for Women's Leadership?*, pp. 246-247.

Women discouraged from public activities

Activities of women were confined primarily to the home. As in Greece and early Rome, women were expected to remain within the house: "Your wife will be a fruitful vine within your house" (Ps 128:3). They were to be faithful wives and sacrificing mothers even at the cost of their own personhood. Home-loving women were highly praised by the family and community (Gen 24:14; Prov 31:10-31; Job 4:3-5). Female leadership, whether political or religious, was generally considered unnatural and undesirable. In such a situation, where kings, judges, prophets, scribes, elders, and members of the Sanhedrin were almost exclusively male, the leadership of exceptional women in Israel's history is remarkable (e.g., Ex 15:20-21; Judg 4 & 5; Neh 6:14; 2 Kings 22:15,18).

2. Women in Luke's Gospel

The Gospel of Luke contains a great deal of material about women that is not found in other Gospels. Women characters are taken over from Mark and from Q¹⁷ and many others are found only in Luke's special source (L).¹⁸ The number of women depicted in Luke and the emphasis on their presence in the narrative are surprising. The tendency to defend, reassure, and praise women is also noticeable in the Gospel (cf. Lk 2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 18:3,5; 20:47; 21:2-3; 7:36-50; 13:16; 10:38-42).¹⁹

However, careful comparison must be made of the quality of female roles and functions and of the liberative potential of each Gospel. A few

¹⁷ "Q" (from the German Word *Quelle*) meaning "source" is a collection of the sayings of Jesus. Most Scripture scholars hold that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, and that they have also utilised Q. This explanation is known as the "Two-Source Hypothesis", according to which Mark's is the oldest of the Gospels. For this information, see K. Luke, *Companion to the Bible*, Vol. II (Bangalore: TPI, 1994), p. 7. See also Oscar Lukefahr, *A Catholic Guide to the Bible* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2003), p. 164.

¹⁸ Jane Schaerg, "Luke," in Newsom and S. H. Ring, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 278.

¹⁹ For an interesting study on "Gender Pairs: Inclusiveness and Segregation," see Turid K. Seim, "The Gospel of Luke," in *Searching the Scriptures*, Vol. Two: *A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 729-731.

examples follow.²⁰ Luke has no women who question Jesus or initiate a mission to the Gentiles. Luke omits the story of the Syro-phoenician woman found in Mark 7:24-30. There is no counterpart in Luke to the Samaritan woman of John 4. The Johannine Martha and Mary seem fulfilling more significant and powerful roles than the Lukan Martha and Mary.

The women at the tomb in Matthew and John are on a mission: they are sent to the men disciples of Jesus with the good news of his resurrection. In Matthew, the women not only receive a commission, but also are greeted by the risen Jesus as they run to tell his disciples (Mt 28:1-10). Likewise, Mary Magdalene emerges as a leading figure in John's resurrection narrative (Jn 20:1-2, 11-18). She is portrayed as an apostle, as the first one to grasp the significance of the empty tomb and to bear witness to others.

A cursory examination of the way the compilers of the Synoptic Gospels treat women shows that Mark and Matthew speak of women following Jesus from Galilee only in the closing stages of their narratives, describing the events of the passion. Luke on the other hand tells of the presence of the women in the first phase of Jesus' activity in Galilee; he also refers to them at the time of his death and of his burial. Luke's Gospel is therefore the only one in which this information is given at two different stages and in two different contexts.

Despite the variation among the Synoptics, all three evangelists note the presence of women at the passion and give the information that these women had followed Jesus from Galilee. In addition, women alone (with the exception of John) stood by Jesus at the crucial moments of his life (see Mk 14:50; Mt 26:56). Unable to cite the witness of the male disciples, the evangelists have to fall back on women, thereby providing a testimony to their fidelity. At this point the Synoptics recognize them as women welcomed by Jesus and who had been *with him, syn auto* (Lk 23:49, 55; Mt 27:55; Mk 15:40) from Galilee.²¹

²⁰ The findings in this section are based to a great extent on Schaberg's scholarly work. See "Luke," p. 279. For more examples, see pp. 280-281.

²¹ C. Ricci makes an interesting observation: Perhaps if the evangelists had been able to refer to the presence of the apostles (men disciples) at the foot of

What follows is a critical examination of the bent woman episode, keeping in mind the liberative thrust of the story. Awareness of the radicalism of feminist consciousness and hermeneutics adds a *prophetic colour* to our study.

3. The Bent Woman (Lk 13:10-17)

An abridged account: Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. There was a woman, who was bent over for 18 years. When Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God (Lk 13:10-13). Indignant that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader expressed his contention (v. 14). But Jesus said: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (vv.15-16). When he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced (v. 17).

The story of the bent woman, unique to Luke's Gospel, has become a paradigm for women's liberation from all forms of bondage. It is one of the five passages in the synoptics where Jesus' healing ministry takes place on a Sabbath (Mk 3:1-6; Mt 12:9-14; Lk 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6), and significantly, it is Luke alone who includes among his three healing stories one of a woman. Interestingly, John does not speak of any healing miracle on the Sabbath while Mathew and Mark each record one healing of a man. Set in the context of Jesus' synagogue teaching, his compassionate gesture towards the bent woman brings her from the periphery to the centre. The woman's initiative of coming to the synagogue evokes a spontaneous response from Jesus. Upon seeing her, Jesus calls her over and says, "Woman you are set free from your ailment" (v 12).

Jesus' cross, they would have (perhaps) omitted to mention the presence of women there. Elsewhere she also calls the reader's attention to take note of the silence surrounding the presence of women at the Last Supper. See C. Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women who followed Jesus* (Kent TN: Burns & Oates, 1994), pp. 19-28.

This nameless woman's 18 years of suffering have become symbolic of the suffering of women down the ages under patriarchy and its sexist ideologies and practices. A parallelism can be established between the 18-year crippled condition of the woman and the story of two lengthy periods of servitude in Israel's history. Drawing on scholarly research we underscore: "As Israel was freed after eighteen years of bondage to Moab (Judg 3:14) and eighteen years of affliction from the Philistines and the Ammonites (Judg 10:8), so this story can speak of freedom that is possible within the Jesus tradition."²²

The bent woman's illness may be described as "*spondylitis ankylopoietica*,"²³ a deformation caused by osteoporosis, a weakening of the bones. As Reid observes, sometimes this can occur as a result of women depriving their own nutritional needs in favour of their husbands and children.²⁴ This is a common phenomenon in the economically backward areas of India, wherein patriarchal ideologies bound up with caste-class factors manipulate and control women's lives. Their self-sacrificing love has been idealised, glorified, used and abused to keep women in their 'proper place', crippling their growth in humanhood/womanhood. Women in other developing countries too bear the brunt of androcentric and misogynist attitudes and practices.

In the case of the bent woman as that of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17), no word is uttered by the woman. Moved with compassion at their pitiable sight, Jesus extends his tender mercy (*karuna*).²⁵ The words of healing, "you have been freed" are expressed in the perfect passive form indicating her freedom from bondage already accomplished by God before Jesus' own intervention.²⁶ Such formulation in the perfect passive

²² Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? - Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p 164.

²³ J. Wilkinson, "The Case of the Bent Woman in Lk 13: 10-17," *EvQ* 49 (1979), PP. 195-205.

²⁴ B. E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?...*, p. 164.

²⁵ For a comparison, see R. J. Raja, *You are Free: Women in the New Testament* (Bangalore: NBLC, 1993), p. 93.

²⁶ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 199. According to Fitzmyer, the instant cure on the Sabbath stands in contrast to the 18 years of infirmity. See J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 Vols. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1981).

tense can be found in Luke 5:20 and 7:47, both referring to utterance of forgiveness by Jesus. Thus Jesus becomes the medium through which God's liberating power is made visible. Having experienced the power of healing and wholeness in herself, instantly the crippled woman stood up straight and glorified God.

It must be noted that this Lukan controversy about Jesus' healing on the Sabbath is preceded by the allegory of the barren fig tree (Lk 13:6-9), set in a political context.²⁷ To quote Schussler Fiorenza, "In the Hebrew Bible the fig tree often stands for Judah or Israel. The gardener then acts as an advocate, pleading the cause for the unproductive tree. Just as a final chance to bear fruit is given to the tree, so too a final opportunity for repentance is granted to Israel."²⁸

The second part of the story (vv.14-17) ends up in a conflict between Jesus and the law-abiding synagogue leader. Subscribing to Reid's findings, a play on the word *dei*, "it is necessary" in verses 14 and 17 underscores the conflict.²⁹ Ignoring the woman's praise (v. 3) and the crowd's acclamation (v. 17), the synagogue official is indignant that Jesus has healed on a Sabbath: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day" (v 14). His reaction speaks volumes about his unequivocal adherence and devotion to the Law even at the cost of love, a distinguishing feature of the Pharisees. It is precisely this extremist position that Jesus condemns by his words, such as "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs" (Mt 23: 13, 23, 25, 27, 29), and the "woes" (Lk 11: 42-52). No wonder, Jesus becomes a threat to Jewish authorities who are hostile to him and refuse to recognize the power of God revealed in him.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza is of the view that the story of the bent woman calls for a hermeneutics of suspicion. Her scholarship reveals that the Lukan miracle story has been turned into a controversy dialogue, a debate with the synagogue leadership which reflects "the tension between the early Christian community and its Jewish mother-community

²⁷ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p. 207.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ B. E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part ...*, p. 165.

in the last quarter of the first century.”³⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the struggle between Christian and Jewish men over the religious authority to interpret the “Law of the Father.”³¹

In keeping with the motive of our investigation, the focal point of the episode is Jesus' life-enhancing interpretation of the Sabbath law and not the patriarchal arguments of the synagogue leader. Jesus in effect is challenging his hard-headed male audience for its obsession with scrupulous observance of the law at the expense of mercy and compassion towards the needy. Unlike the synagogue official who relies on a legalistic interpretation of the law, Jesus reasons from “commonly accepted exceptions”, such as loosening one's ox or ass on the Sabbath in order to give it water.³² The ironic contrast is strengthened by a play of word *leuin* (one loosens) an ox or ass (v.15); so the woman must be loosened, *luein* (v.16). If exceptions could be made in the case of animals, how much more should be their concern for a daughter of Abraham (and Sarah), bound for 18 years! (vv.15 -16).

Thus Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of his opponents and emphasises the necessity of God's redeeming plan being actualized (v.16). Pointing to the messianic era which is to be characterised by compassion and mercy, Jesus “deflates the apparently ‘Pharisee biased’ holiness code, and broadens it to include the overall well-being of the poor.”³³ By confronting the synagogue official, Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for their legalistic interpretation of the Jewish code of Law that in reality

³⁰ E.Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said...*, p 208. The author proposes that for a discussion of the question of anti-Judaism in Luke – Acts see J. T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke – Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) and J. B. Tyson, ed., *Luke – Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988).

³¹ E.Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p. 28.

³² E. Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory Of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp.125-126.

³³ S.J. Anthonysamy, “Jesus' Campaign for Justice - Reflections from His Initial Kingdom Mission,” in A. Peter Abir, ed., *Word of God Source of Justice and Peace* (Tindivanam: TNBCLC, 2008), p. 97. I am indebted to the author for the information cited here

favoured 'life and prosperity and not death and adversity' (Deut 30:15). Convinced of his life-enhancing and saving mission, Jesus proclaims: "The Sabbath is made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). For Jesus, human needs take precedence even over the Sabbath law.³⁴ While Jesus' adversaries are put to shame, the whole crowd rejoices at all the splendid deeds done by him (v.17).

The phrase, "daughter of Abraham" is noteworthy in the narrative, for it signifies one of God's chosen people (cf. 4 Macc 15:28; 14:20; 17:6; 18:20). The bent woman is now recognized as a person, a member of God's family. As a daughter of Abraham, who is believed to be the original recipient of God's election and promise to ancestors, she shares in the blessings promised to Abraham's descendants. The same idea is implied when Jesus addressed the woman with a haemorrhage "daughter" in Luke 8:48. What is significant here is that these 'daughters of Abraham' who have been socially stigmatized and impure have been restored to wholeness³⁵. The phrase stands parallel to "son of Abraham" attributed to Zacchaeus (LK 19:9).³⁶ Luke seems to project the fact that men and women enjoy equal status in God's family.

4. Jesus and the 'Bent' Women of Today

Our analyses reveal a striking similarity between the plight of women in Jesus' time and that of today. Several factors - social, cultural, religious, political and economic - continue to keep women in general and Indian/Asian women in particular, in a crippled situation. The following section will highlight some of the ground realities responsible for women's 'bent' condition in our society and church.

³⁴ In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath regulations were an integral part of the holiness code and to be treated 'sacrosanct'. Accordingly, activities like plucking corn and healing were enlisted in a series of 39 such 'works' as forbidden on Sabbath (cf. Ex 34:21)

³⁵ T K Seim, "The Gospel of Luke," in *Searching the Scriptures...*, pp. 737-738. As Siem says, in Luke non-Jews are never called Abraham's children as they are in Paul.

³⁶ B. Varghese, *Women In The Gospel of Luke: The Role of Women in the Portrayal of Salvation in the Gospel of Luke* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), p. 154.

Women in Society

The gender and women's issues in India are unique as they are bound up with caste-class realities and sexism *per se*. The country's sex ratio is an eye-opener: 933 women for every 1000 men. Based on census 2011, men outnumber women in India by 37 million. The factors responsible for the decreasing number of women are in the public domain, no more a hidden secret. The leaflet titled "37 Million Reasons Why You Should Care" spells out the reasons, "India's shame - female genocide: aborted before birth, poisoned, drowned, stifled, deliberately neglected; burnt for dowry, sacrificed in childbirth, killed in sickness, starved to death...."³⁷ For a comprehensive picture of the gender question, it is worth citing some key extracts from the Indian Theological Association (ITA) Statement:

Though gender equality at all levels is accepted universally 'in theory' gender discrimination 'in practice' against females in our country is still a persistent and perturbing problem. The inability of parliamentarians to accept 33% reservation for women is a symbol of the unequal distribution of powers in all other sectors of Indian society. The dehumanising discrimination, oppression and exclusion of women from decision making bodies in civil society as well as in the Church, continues in our society despite constitutional guarantees towards gender equality... In recent times the nation has been witnessing a phenomenal increase in violence against women...the nation witnessed massive upsurge of awakened citizens, especially of women's movements against the monstrosity of rape.³⁸

In a recently published article on the "Subjugation and Subordination of Women" by Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, it is reported that India's "progress is marred by widespread inequality with caste-class-gender divides. Despite the struggle for equality and justice since Independence, and several women occupying high offices of power, violence against

³⁷ Women's Commission, Archdiocese of Bombay, 2013.

³⁸ Statement of the 35th Annual Meeting cum Seminar of the Indian Theological Association (ITA Statement, Bangalore 2012) on the theme "Corruption in Public Life : A Theological Response", p.4.

women remains one of the most enduring injustices of history.”³⁹ It is also a fact that marginalized communities like the Dalits, Adivasis and sexual minorities are the worst hit victims of violence and injustice. Male dominance, nurtured by women’s passive resignation to their so-called fate, helps to perpetuate the pathetic state of affairs in many communities in our country.

Women in the Church

Just as patriarchy pervades all areas of a woman’s life in society, so too church structures and doctrines control and domesticate Christian women. The Catholic Church is no exception. For instance, gender discrimination that is maintained through androcentric biblical interpretations, theological articulations, sexist language and an all-male leadership. Because religious patriarchy considers itself to be divinely ordained, women by and large, have succumbed to the sin of passivity and choose to remain under a ‘benevolent patriarchy’. With a few exceptions, most women keep a low profile in church affairs and do only what has been asked; they do not confront unjust situations that lead to their exploitation and fail to claim their rightful place in decision-making bodies.

The hierarchy in the Catholic Church, made up exclusively of ordained men, does not seem conducive to women (laity in general) to assume leadership roles. While acknowledging the hierarchical nature of the church referred to in *Lumen Gentium*, it must be pointed out that hierarchy, however, does not mean gradation or pyramidal in structure, a meaning developed when the church fell for imperial and feudal ways of inequalities. As Samuel Rayan explains, “The Church is hierarchic means that it has a sacred beginning (*hieracrche*) in God’s will, in Jesus’ ministry and the presence of the Spirit... It also means that the Church is a well-ordered fellowship endowed with diverse gifts and tasks co-ordinated in

³⁹ See “Subjugation & Subordination of Women in ‘Incredible India’: The Myths on Gender Violence”, *Facts Against Myths* (FMA), Information Bulletin, #5, 2012-13, pp. 1-8, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai. This information has been obtained from John Desrochers, “Women In India Today”, *Integral Liberation*, Vol.17, No.2 (June 2013), pp.137- 166.

love for service and growth of the whole..."⁴⁰ Moreover it is important to reiterate that the present style of church leadership evolved in the course of time, influenced by socio-political and the religious leadership patterns of the then society. This assertion may be substantiated by Parapally's insights:

The evolution of leadership or the unfolding of the leadership into a hierarchical structure cannot be attributed purely to the working of the Holy Spirit as it is generally held in the Church. But it could be a combination of both... God's Spirit being 'the originator of differences and the instigator of communion' would not lead any human society to order its structures with a ranking of higher or lower functionaries...⁴¹

Despite the gracious attitude of Pope Francis towards women, he seems rather reluctant to break the 'unbroken' tradition of an all-male Church leadership. In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope, while acknowledging women's share in pastoral responsibilities and contributions to theological reflection "demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded."⁴² However, he adds: "The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion...."⁴³

⁴⁰ S.Rayan, "Hierarchy- Religious Relationship in the Context," in *It Shall Not Be So Among You* (Hyderabad: A Forum Publication, 1999), p. 90.

⁴¹ Jacob Parapally, "Hierarchical Structures in the Church: Implications For Gender Relations," in Astrid Lobo Gajiwala et al., eds., *Gender Relations In The Church: A Call To Wholeness And Equal Discipleship* (Pune: Streevani & Montfort Social Institute, Hyderabad, 2012), pp. 138-139.

⁴² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2013), p. 84.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 85. It should be noted that "Jesus did not leave behind him a hierarchy, a class of people called 'priests'." See Joseph Mattam, "Being Church in Asia: New Evangelization and Challenges," in Joy Thomas & Victor Zackarias, eds., *New Evangelization – Asian Perspectives* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2012), p.194; full

Such position is rather detrimental to women. For, as long as the priesthood remains the only qualification (as of now) to one's entry into the ministerial government of the church, and as long as women are barred from ordination, women have no access to the decision-making bodies in the church. This exclusion of women from key positions of authority deprives them of their unique contribution to the life and mission of the church.⁴⁴ While women constitute the large majority of active members and are the sustaining force, in a male-dominated church, women are always at the receiving end, virtually having no power within its structure. They have been given their 'appropriate role' and are expected to function within the prescribed parameters.

One wonders whether the church's organizational structure is a distortion of the teaching and praxis of Jesus who envisaged his community as a circle of friends (Jn 15: 12-16), a discipleship of equals (Mt. 23:2-10; Gal 3:26-28), in which authority consists in the primacy of witness and not of domination.⁴⁵ Soares-Prabhu succinctly points out, "It was a community that was free, all-inclusive, open to sharing, prepared for service, and radically equal."⁴⁶ The existing ecclesiastical governance also contradicts the liberative perspective of Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* that condemns any form of discrimination on the basis of sex, colour, social conditions, language or religion (GS no.29) and exhorts the faithful to participate more fully in the church's apostolate (*Apostolicam*

text, pp. 191-206; see also George Sores-Prabhu, "Christian Priesthood in India Today: A Biblical Reflection," *VJTR*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (February 1992); Ambrose Pinto, "A Murder and Many Questions," *Indian Currents*, Vol. XXVI, No. 14 (31 March- 6 April 2014), pp. 27-30.

⁴⁴ To value women's God-given potential and their commitment to Church's mission, see Virginia Saldanha, ed., *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life, Vol. II* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2011). See also Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Women as Partners in Mission," *The New Leader*, Vol. 127, No. 5 (March 1-15, 2014), pp. 10-13.

⁴⁵ Rekha Chennattu, "Towards a Covenant Model of Leadership: An Interpretation of John 13," *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XLII, No. 248 (March 2012), p. 143; full text, pp. 133-145.

⁴⁶ George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church," *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XV, No.88 (July 1985), p. 318.

Actuositatem, no.9). Regretting that the institutional church has lost sight of Jesus' movement, that was "originally revolutionary and counter-cultural," Mattam admonishes all to go back to the Gospels.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the official church's position on women is riddled with ambiguities and inconsistencies.

Nevertheless, women do recognize the empowering teachings of Vatican II on women's dignity and vocation, and subsequent pronouncements by Popes and Bishops, including the recent CBCI statement.⁴⁸ Special mention should be made of the *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, aimed at addressing "the concerns of women, who are doubly marginalized and oppressed" and promoting the "egalitarian message of Jesus, with the vision of collaborative Church with Gender Justice."⁴⁹

Rooted in faith and committed to the prophetic mission of Jesus, women of courage and determination have taken upon themselves the mission of challenging sex-gender stereotypes and sexist ideologies that keep women crippled. Simultaneously, by means of training programmes and support systems, they enhance the empowerment of the voiceless and faceless women (and men), despite all hurdles. One of the current praiseworthy initiatives to work towards gender justice in Church and Society, and foster solidarity and sisterhood is the formation of "The Indian Christian Women's Movement."⁵⁰

Conclusion

"Woman you are set free" (Lk 13:12). With this solemn declaration, Jesus cuts through all canons of Jewish male chauvinism. He ushers in

⁴⁷ J. Mattam, "Being Church in Asia...", p. 193.

⁴⁸ See George Plathottam, "A Roadmap for Renewed Church," *Indian Currents*, Vol. XXVI, No.8 (17-23 February 2014), pp. 26-29.

⁴⁹ Published by CBCI Commission for Women & CBCI, New Delhi, 2010. The quotes are from the "Foreword". With a view to "promoting awareness and implementing the ideas and principles contained in the document," Streevani has published a book titled *Gender Justice and Catholic Church: Beliefs and Behaviours – A Scientific Study*, 2014.

⁵⁰ For details, contact Streevani : streevani@gmail.com

God's liberation by taking an uncompromising stance in support of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. Adopting an attitude of critical discernment towards the existing socio-religio-cultural customs, laws, economic and political powers of his day, Jesus denounces all oppressive forces and announces a new social and religious order (cf. Mt 5:1-12; Lk 6:20-26). Because of his preferential option for the poor, Jesus brings about a Godly revolution, a complete reversal in a person's scale of values, attitudes and actions, which should penetrate the structures of our society and church.

Just as Jesus saw the crippled woman (v.12) and called her, spoke to her, laid his hands on her, he sees the 'bent' condition of women in today's church and society, a condition caused by their low-self esteem, lack of opportunities to develop their God-given gifts and talents and their being pushed to the periphery. Calling them/us to the full flowering of our personhood and womanhood, Jesus is challenging all women to overcome self-inflicted or man-made inferiority and resist sinful structures that restrict our full participation in the life of the church and society.

Like the 'bent' woman in Luke, the women of today are urged to emulate her courage to stand up and claim our right to a dignified way of life, marked by our faith in Jesus, the great Prophet-Liberator (Lk 4:18-19) and commitment to his mission. Inspired by his wisdom and bold critique of the law in view of furthering God's reign, women ought to enhance the institutional church to liberate itself from its ideological fetters, and become an authentic interpreter of doctrines and dogmas. Grounded in Jesus and energized by the Spirit, we shall operate as agents of individual and structural transformation. In the footsteps of our foremothers in the faith, we are to function as powerful witnesses and spokespersons of God's liberative action in favour of the voiceless and marginalized people and the whole creation.

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Jesus' Approach to the Subaltern Issues

Roy Lazar A.

The announcement of the reign of God by Jesus is to the entire universe. But a specific group of people who are invited to appropriate this call are the subalterns. Jesus declares in his so called *Nazareth Manifesto* (Luke, 4, 14-18) what is the core thrust of his ministry and who are specifically addressed by his clarion call. The marginalised and exploited are given preference in the new *reign of God* inaugurated by Jesus. He guarantees the poor and marginalized that God is on their side. There is no other shorter way to actualize the reign of God in our times than following Jesus who by his total commitment and love of God the Father and of the entire creation unfolded a tri-fold mission of the reign of God, namely, '*Denunciation, Annunciation and Transformation*', i.e. a prophetic denunciation of the evil, announcement of the Good News to the poor and transformation of the sinful structures and a reconstruction of them in accordance with the norms of the reign of God. The responsibility of the church is to be constantly aware of its original call and strive persistently to realise the vision of Jesus by ushering in the full realisation of the reign of God where 'God will make his home among human beings; they will be his people and he will be their God, *God-with-them*.'

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Introduction

Once more an article on *Jesus' approach to subaltern issues*! Can it offer anything new even if a subtitle is tagged to it sounding: *in the*

Indian Context? Will it not be beating up again what already many doyens of Indian Theology have dealt with? Can anything be added to George M. Soares-Prabhu's "The Dharma of Jesus: An Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount"¹, Samuel Rayan's "Outside the Gate, Sharing the Insults",² Sebastian Kappen's *Jesus Today*³, Michael Amaladoss' *Making All Things New*,⁴ Felix Wilfred's *Leave the Temple*⁵ and Paul Leon's *Yar Intha Yesu? (Who is this Jesus?)*⁶. The readers of *Jeevadhara* might find this article a summing up of these great masters' thoughts, which inspired many of us, students of theology in those two decades. Bear with me, if my attempt appears to some as a tarnishing or diminishing of the original vigour and spirit under the pretext of linguistic and ideological subtlety and suitability and also for dealing with Jesus' approach to the subalterns instead of subaltern issues!

Reign of God – the Start!

Jesus inaugurated his public ministry announcing the dawn of the *reign of God* (*basileia theo*, Mk 1, 15), which forms the foundation and core of his life and teaching. The term *reign of God/heaven* occurs 123 times in the New Testament which shows its importance in the teachings of Jesus. The Kingdom shall subsist on the existential and on eschatological level as well as on the spiritual and socio-political level; it is "already" and "not yet" - enshrining futuristic dimension within its actual thrust for the present. It cannot be tied to any particular group or nation but it embraces everyone and everything - individuals, the society, and the whole universe and the entire reality is destined to be overpowered by its presence and sway.⁷ It is gratuitous and open not only to the people of Israel but to all (Luke 13, 29). It calls for a change of heart to transform relationships both in micro and macro level; it is very dynamic; grows like a mustard seed (Matt 13, 31ff.) and effectively spreads like the yeast in the dough (Matt 13, 22ff.). It has an option for the poor

¹ 1981. (*Biblehashyam* 4) pp.322-346

² 1981. (*Jeevadhara* XI) pp.203-231

³ 1985. Ed. (Chennai: AICUF Publication)

⁴ 1990. (Maryknoll: Orbis)

⁵ 1992. Ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis)

⁶ 1995. (Dindugal: Vaigarai)

⁷ Cf. L. Boff. 1978. *Jesus, the Liberator* (Maryknoll: Orbis)

(Luke 4, 18-19; 6, 20) and demands a praxis that is born out of the freedom and commitment to the love of the Father. "The freedom of Jesus, which was inspired by Father's will to save, found way through social conflict without using euphemisms or evasions and without ever surrendering his sense of the other or his concern for individuals in their concrete situations. The practice of the Kingdom supported this freedom of Jesus that was dedicated to creating the human conditions needed for a creative life and a life free of the bonds that limit to the past and prevent its full development".⁸ The only rule that counts in this kingdom is love which gives without calculating the consequences and which indulges in a liberating praxis (Luke 10, 25ff, 6, 27ff.).

The addressee of the announcement of the reign of God is the entire universe however; there is a specific identity of those who are invited to appropriate this call. Jesus declares in his so called *Nazareth Manifesto* (Luke, 4, 14-18) what is the core thrust of his ministry and who are specifically addressed by his clarion call. The marginalised and exploited are given preference in the new *reign of God* inaugurated by his very self. He guarantees the poor and marginalized that God is on their side. That is the hallmark of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. He confirms his identity to the disciples of John the Baptist who approached him enquiring (Luke, 7, 22) about his credentials by his works of the kingdom for the subalterns of his day. The Beatitudes (Mathew 5, 3-11; Luke 6, 20-26) portray the identity of those who are worthy of the reign of God, the poor, the hungry, persecuted for justice, those who mourn now, etc. Jesus makes crystal clear what should be the signs of the presence of the reign of God by laying down the criterion for the final judgement (Matt. 25, 31-40). Hence, it is an invitation to *the poor* and poor in the fullest sense of the meaning, both material as well as spiritual (Mathew 5, 2; 11, 5; Luke 4, 18). The poor in the biblical language, the *anawim* YHWH, are all those who are driven away from the power centres to the periphery, the subalterns of the hegemonic society, yet hold on to God as their one and only wealth and strength.⁹ Soares-Prabhu

⁸ H. Echeagaray. 1984. *The Practice of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis) p. 92

⁹ Cf. G. Soares-Prabhu. 1985. "Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor a Social Class?" in *Vidyajyoti* 49.

says that 'Jesus went around in the countryside preaching the good news about the Kingdom (Mathew 4, 23) and teaching the way of God (Mt 22,16) and these teachings and preaching were intended for the 'little ones', unlearned in the Law, and the tax collectors and sinners, with no moral or religious standing whatever'.¹⁰ The subalterns of his time, the poor, women, children, sinners, the sick and who are denied of social and cultural identities – all the marginalised and exploited people have the special preference in the reign of God, because of their trust in God alone. "His love and compassion for the suffering and the outcasts knows no bounds. His proclamation of the poor as blessed (Lk 6, 20) and the statement that the reign of God is promised to the least (Mk 10, 42) flow from his solidarity and total identification with the least: 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25, 40). By their practice everyone is ultimately judged".¹¹ They are called to realise the fullness of the reign of God here on earth and march towards its fulfilment at the end of time.

New Testament describes how Jesus made the dawn of the reign of God possible for the people by his preaching and miracles; and being handed over to his tormenters and then finally being crucified on the cross. His resurrection from the dead proved that the kingdom strategy will finally win over the powers of evil. There is no shorter way to the Kingdom than following Jesus who in his total commitment and love of God the Father and of the entire creation unfolded a tri-fold mission of the reign of God, namely, '*Denunciation, Annunciation and Transformation*, i.e. a prophetic denunciation of the evil, announcement of the Good News to the poor and transformation of the sinful structures and reconstruct them in accordance with the norms of the reign of God. 'God of the Bible' as E. Klinger insists, 'is above all a social instance, so much so, his very name has social structure. It indicates not only transcendence and majesty but also immanence and partnership especially with those who are exploited by the powerful and who are called to be

¹⁰ Cf. Ibid. 1992. "The Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus" in: (F. Wilfred, 1992), pp.102-103

¹¹ F. Wilfred. 1992, p.193

witness for justice and peace'.¹² The temptation to understand the reign of God as merely as a spiritual enterprise for the other world at the end of times should be resisted emphasising the 'here and now' as the one of the core aspects of the kingdom. "The reign of God is *amidst* you" - Luke 17, 21: the Greek preposition *entos* in this saying of Jesus was wrongly translated as '*within*' stressing the spiritual and personal dimension of God's reign. But what Jesus meant is the immanent presence of the reign of God as an historical event encompassing the entire universe. And when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18, 36), he meant that the objectives and the style of functioning are not of the world. The reign of God will have a new value system totally different from that of the world of his time.¹³

Denunciation of the Oppressors

The prophets of the Old Testament assured that justice and mercy would flow abundantly where the reign of God would take root and the poor and the needy and so also the sick and the sinners will feel welcomed by the Son of Man (Luke 15, 1; 19, 1-10). Jesus' speciality for the subalterns was manifested by his out pouring of compassion on them. He saw the multitudes who were like sheep without a shepherd and healed them of their infirmities (Mt 9, 36; 14, 14; Mk 6, 34), consoled the grieved (Lk 7, 13) moved by pity at the sight of the hungry and began to feed them (Mk 8, 2). He showed his love for the poor by denouncing the evil forces that were at war against the poor. He did it by condemning the evil, challenging the power structures and then calling the oppressors for conversion. He called Herod 'a fox' and the hypocritical Sadducees and the Pharisees 'white-washed sepulchres' (Lk 13, 32, Mk 8, 15, Lk 11, 37-48; Mt 23, 13-26).

And Jesus revealed God who is *Abba* for all yet who is concerned about the misery of his suffering people and hears the cry of his people for deliverance (Exodus 3, 7-10). "The God of Jesus is specially concerned with the poor and the oppressed (Amos 2, 6-8; 4, 1-3; 5, 7-17, Is 1, 17, 21;

¹² Cf. E. Klinger.1998. "Betreuungspastoral, Mitgliederpastoral oder Sozialpastoral?" in: *imprimatur* 3, pp.117-125, here p. 120

¹³ Paul Leon. 1995. pp.75-76

61,1-3; Ps 37) because he knows that justice is on their side. He is the absolute, unconditional NO to evil in every form. He owes it to himself to repel injustice, as light to dispel darkness. Therefore, he cannot but oppose those who grind the heads of the poor in the dust of the earth. He is just in his total rejection of evil and in that his holiness consists. *The Lord of Hosts sits high in judgement, and by righteousness the holy God shows himself holy* (Is 5, 16). Naturally, when such a God irrupts into history, there is a war against the oppressors, himself fighting on the side of the oppressed. The justice of God thus becomes a history of struggles for justice among men".¹⁴

Therefore, Jesus' declaration of the reign of God challenged the power centres and also the ideologies that supported such unjust system of exploitation. Reign of God from the perspectives of the poor as witness for political commitment interprets the existing praxis and the ideologies behind them with a '*subaltern hermeneutic*',¹⁵ a *hermeneutic of suspicion or interrogation*'. It is 'subaltern' in as much as it approaches the history and culture not from the viewpoint of the conquerors rather from that of the defeated, the victims and exploited and who have become prey to unjust social, political, economic and cultural structures. It is 'suspicious' or critical of the existing praxis and the supportive theory in the sense that it delves analytically at the motive behind every action and corresponding ideology in order to arrive at authentic practice of the reign of God. Therefore, it could be asserted that the Good News about the reign of God critiques the existing practice of injustice and pleads for the realisation of the reign of God here and now. The value scale of the reign of God serves as the acid test for the norms of the socio-cultural and political praxis.

The announcement of the reign of God condemns the force of the evil but at the same time it does not send them to gallows rather it calls for conversion (*metanoia*), a radical change from the exploitive praxis and takes the side of the poor. Jesus doesn't want the sinner to perish rather he wants him to give up his rebellion against God and return to his healing

¹⁴ S. Kappen. 1985. pp.14-15

¹⁵ Cf. F. Wilfred. 1998. "Subaltern Religious Experience" in: *Journal of Dharma* XXIII/1, pp. 57-75

and enduring presence and to follow the values of the reign of God. The New Testament describes that reconciliation is an essential aspect of the mission of Jesus. He is the Lamb of God (John 1, 29) who offers himself as a ransom for many (Mk 10, 45); he himself is the high priest and the sacrifice (Heb 7, 27). St. Paul explains that Jesus is the sacrament of reconciliation and 'he himself has reconciled all peoples through his death on the cross' (Eph 2, 13-18). 'God was pleased to reconcile through Jesus all things to himself' (2 Col 9-10). Therefore, there is place for all in the reign of God even for the rich and the oppressors of the poor provided they repent and give up their sinful ways and riches and get reconciled with God. One who would like to enter into the reign of God must sell off his possessions, give them to the poor and then follow him (Mt 6, 19-21; Mk 10, 28-30; Lk 12, 33-34; 14,33).

Annunciation of the Good Tidings

The second step in Jesus' approach to the subalterns is the announcing of the Good News (*evangelion*), the message of victory from the battle field. By saying that "the reign of God is *amidst/among* you" (Lk 17, 21) Jesus explained that it is a real and historical occurrence. Socio-economic thrust is also obvious in Luke 6, 20-21 as it speaks of 'an imminent reversal of the existing unjust social order and God's royal power to save the oppressed is manifestly at work in history, in people and their struggles'.¹⁶ Jesus had deep concern for the poor plagued by sickness and evil spirits, oppressed by political and religious powers, ostracised and marginalized by the social and cultural systems and the Good News for them is that God is on their side and the victory is assured to them. His unconditional acceptance of the oppressed and solidarity with them finds its culmination in his radical commitment to love when he laid down his life as an avoidable consequence of his ministry. And 'this love of God and of human being is the *Magna Charta of his Christ-ness*; and what is against love is atheistic or a denial of God'.¹⁷ In short, his kingdom consists in his love demonstrated in his unconditional

¹⁶ Cf. S. Rayan. 1985. "Congratulations to the Poor" in S. Kappen. 1985, p. 64

¹⁷ Cf. L. Karrer.2001. "Jesus: Vision und Praxis christlichen Lebens" in: H. Haslinger (Ed.).2001. *Handbuch I. Pastoraltheologie* (Mainz: Gruenewald) p. 155

acceptance and option for the others, active solidarity in their struggle for life, life in fullness and in radical commitment to the cause, to the extent of offering his own life.

New Testament presents in clear terms that Jesus was very resolute in his option for the poor. Jesus was not neutral in his mission and he also radicalised Yahweh's option for the poor as he announced the dawn of the reign of God in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4, 18-19). God has a preferential option for them not because of the virtue of their goodness nor because he loves suffering but just because the poor are defenceless victims of injustice and they trust only in the Lord for salvation. God is everything and the only hope for the poor. Frei Betto, a Benedictine brother who worked among the basic Christian communities in Brazil, describes the relation between the poor and God:

The poor eat God, sleep in God, scold God, go with God, and say 'thanks be to God, it is the will of God, for the love of God. In order to understand all these: a God whom one eats, drinks, in whom one rests, and with whom one dances, - we must go through the process of *Kenosis* - emptying ourselves thoroughly. We have still in our heads the God of our catechism: "all perfect, all powerful, omniscient and omnipresent, etc., Our God is a God of victims, a God of the poor and a God of Samba."¹⁸

The poor are the 'historical place' where the encounter with God really takes place'.¹⁹ God showed his solidarity with the poor by becoming human. "He took flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1, 14). Pope Francis highlights the presence of God with us thanks to the incarnation of His Son. "God lowers himself, coming down to earth as little and poor, showing that in order to be similar to him we must not place ourselves above others, but rather lower ourselves, place ourselves in service, make ourselves small with the small, poor with the poor. We must make it so that our brothers and sisters never feel alone. Our presence in solidarity to their side expresses not only with words but with the eloquence of

¹⁸F. Betto. 1985. „Theologie der Befreiung und Spiritualität des Volk Gottes" in: L. Boff/F. Betto, 1985. *Mystik der Straße*, (Maryknoll: Orbis) pp.53-54 here p. 54

¹⁹ Cf. J. Sobrino. 1989. *Geist, der befreit*, (Freiburg: Herder) p. 45

gestures that God is close to all" (*Advent Message* on 20th Dec. 2013). Jesus humbled himself and became human and finally emptied his divinity on the cross (Phil 2, 5-11) so that we might have life in fullness (Jn 10, 10).

Transformation of the Existing Order

Jesus' option for the subalterns has cost his life in order to restore them the fullness of the reign of God. The obviousness and *radicality* of his commitment to do the will of the Father makes Jesus' approach unique and distinct from any other humanitarian activities. His solidarity with the subalterns leads him to reverse the existing social order and create a new earth and new heaven where there are no Jews or gentiles, slaves or freemen, male or female but all are one in Jesus Christ (Gal 3, 28). The *Magnificat* of Mary (Lk 1, 51-53) describes the reversal that the reign of God will have and God is shown as standing the world on its head and turning the social order upside down.²⁰ Luke. 6, 1-5 shows very clearly how Jesus challenges even the religious laws in defence of the hungry claiming that the Son of Man is the master of the Sabbath. The healing of the man with the withered hand in Luke 6, 6-11 shows his concern for the suffering to the extent of violating the law of Sabbath in order to heal him. Nothing is greater in his reign of God than the liberation of the afflicted and restoration of their dignity and honour.

The subalterns are given recognition and their worth is acknowledged and appreciated in public. The impure Samaritans and sinful tax collectors are the good people receiving the place of honour in the reign of God. They are grateful (Lk 17, 11-19), faithful & humble (Lk 18, 9-14), charitable (Lk 10, 29-37). The good news is revealed to the little ones (Lk 10, 21-22) and they are the greatest in the reign of God. Women are the first and preferred recipients of the good news. For instance, Mary was given the call to conceive and bring forth the Messiah into the world (Lk 1, 26-38) and Mary Magdalene along with other women encountered the Risen Lord and were sent to announce the resurrection to the apostles (Lk 24, 1-11). The subalterns at the time of Jesus received an extraordinary attention and acceptance in the reign of God which is categorically stated in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 3-11; Lk 6, 20-22).

²⁰ Cf. S. Rayan. 1981, p. 280

The miracles in the Gospels are symbolic acts of Jesus that demonstrate his solidarity with those who are driven to the periphery by the enslaving and inhuman power structures, which are inimical to the reign of God. They also narrate the new style of restoring the marginalised to the centre of both divine and human interactions. Jesus' approach is tangent in the manner in which he accepts the afflicted and exploited as human beings in their *Daseins* with their brokenness and *places them at the centre* of his dealings (Cf. Luke 6, 6-11; Luke 13, 10-17). In Luke 13, 10-17 the healing of the crippled woman possessed by a spirit is described with a religious and political overtone. The style of healing her also reveals the mode of functioning in the reign of God. Jesus, a Jewish itinerant teacher, calls a crippled woman possessed for eighteen years to come *near* him and heals her by *declaring*: "Woman, you are freed from your disability". And then further he has the audacity to '*lay his hands on her*' (V. 13) and she straightens up and *starts glorifying God*'. Jesus' healing of the crippled woman is not merely a physical or medical act but it is also a socio-cultural revolt. He frees her from the cultural bondage and literally 'consecrates' her to do the priestly act of serving God. Laying off hands on someone in the biblical narratives is linked with empowering someone with priestly and political authority. Jesus dares to do it for the woman who was crippled by the power structures of the society along with her physical infirmity. And again in another instance, the Synoptic Gospels describe the healing of the man with leprosy as one of Jesus' first miracles. He heals him by stretching out his hand and touching him, thus shattering all the laws of purity and segregation of the marginalised due to their deadly illness (Mt 8, 1-4, Mk 1, 44-45; Lk 5, 12-16).

Luke 6, 6-11 describes another miracle of healing a man with a withered hand. Jesus tells him: "*Get up and stand in the middle* (V.8)". The marginalised and expelled are not only healed of their sickness but they are also re-enthroned at the centre. It is not out of charity but justice demands that they are restored to their rightful place in the society from where they were driven away through violent and unjust methods of exploitation and enslavement. It is an act of political empowerment of the weak to assert their right for dignity. Jesus' miracles are not mere charitable acts but also acts of social justice and political empowerment of the afflicted.

If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed (Mark 5:28). That's what she told herself, this nameless, bleeding woman who would have traveled a little more than 30 miles in order to meet Jesus inspired by nothing but faith. It was indeed a daring act. She indulges in another daring act in the presence of the miracle healer whom she longed to meet. According to Mosaic Law, women who were ceremonially unclean weren't allowed to touch anyone, let alone the Son of God. But nothing could stop her once she is in his presence. For 12 long years blood had flowed from her body, making her physically sick and socially unacceptable like an Untouchable. She dared not step in before him to plead for his healing power. Instead she quietly came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak (Mark 5:27). By law, her touch would have made him unclean but just the opposite has happened. Immediately her bleeding stopped (Mark 5:29). Without a word, a look, or a touch from Jesus, she was made whole simply by believing that he, only he could heal her. And it did happen! She was healed instantly but dared not present herself to others nor could she believe what had happened to her. Jesus calls her out to present herself to the public not to accuse but to affirm her merit. The same faith that empowered her to stretch out her hand now gave her the strength to step forward. She fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth (Mark 5:33). With another single word from Jesus 12 years of pain and isolation were swept away. He calls her: "*Daughter*" (Mark 5:34). In no other Gospel account does Jesus use this term of endearment and respect: *Daughter*. She is not an outcaste because of her illness but has become a member of the family now, restored to her community, setting an example for others who begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed (Mark 6:56). She is not a slave, not an untouchable, not a criminal, not a sinner, but a daughter of the family – ostracized by the inhuman society through its unjust culture and politics. Jesus' act blows apart the edifice of the legal and political system that enslaves and exploits people in the name of religion, culture and what not.

The ultimate scope of Jesus' ministry is envisaged as an integral liberation of the poor, which calls for a *preferential option for the poor*, a key formulation from the Conference of Latin American Bishops

(CELAM) at Puebla.²¹ 'The *preferential option for the pòor* is not merely a new name for the well-known works of charity (*caritas*) rather it is *agape* extending to social and political dimensions of the Christian call.²² Clodius Boff says that 'this option for the poor is not limiting the power of Gospels to a particular class or group, rather it is an option for the children of God who cry for justice out of their enslavement and it is a being faithful to the Gospel of Christ who identified himself *not only with the poor* but *also in the poor* as well. It is not a metaphysical or theoretical concept but a historical and redemptive praxis.²³ Preferential option for the poor is expressed through a radical commitment to justice, which according to *Justice in the World* (1971) is the work of evangelisation. Leonardo Boff points out to the clarity in the expression in the document as he says, "Where justice is not preached, there is no Gospel of Jesus Christ".²⁴ Therefore, the main emphasis in the praxis of Jesus is not merely *christianisation* but *evangelisation* of the world, namely, not the self-development of the church but building up of the reign of God here on earth. The Latin American bishops declared in 1968 in Medellín, "We do not confuse temporal progress and the Kingdom of Christ; nevertheless, the former, to the extent that it can contribute to the better ordering of human society, is of vital concern of the Kingdom of God (GS 36). Christian quest for justice is a demand arising from biblical teaching... In the search for salvation we must avoid the dualism, which separates temporal tasks from the work of salvation."²⁵ Such pastoral praxis of liberation of the exploited bears testimony to the love of God that is proclaimed in and through the Gospel. 'The proclamation of the integral liberation, therefore, belongs to the very core of an evangelisation that seeks the authentic realisation of the human being'.²⁶

²¹ Cf. D. Dorr. 1992. *Option for the Poor*, (Maryknoll: Orbis)

²² Cf. C. Boff/J. Pixley. 1987. *Die Option für die Armen* (Duesseldorf: Patmos)

²³ Ibid. pp. 138-148,

²⁴ L. Boff. 1985. *Kirche: Charisma und Macht*, (Duesseldorf: Patmos) p.51

²⁵ Medellín Documents: Justice, No. 5

²⁶ Puebla Document: Evangelisation, Liberation and Human promotion, in: J. Desrochers. 1992. *The Social teaching of the Church*, (Bangalore: CSA/ISI) p. 340.

Conclusion

Those who are set free by the good news of the reign of God don't scatter away as individuals or groups without a collective identity. The liberated are called for the community of the new heaven and earth and become the followers of the new way, as the Acts of the Apostles describes. 'The early Christians gathered together, prayed the Psalms, broke the bread in communion and shared their belongings so that no one was in need among them' (Acts 2, 42-45). Thus Jesus through his word and deed envisioned "a community based not on discipleship or on any set of doctrines, rituals and laws, but solely on doing the will of God which, for him, meant loving one's neighbour in deed. Since its focus is on the reign of God to come, one might call it a basileic community".²⁷ 'What Jesus preached was the reign of God' as Hans Küng points out provocatively, 'but what had emerged was the church'. There lies the responsibility on the church to be constantly aware of its original call and strive persistently to realise the vision of Jesus by ushering in the full realisation of the reign of God where 'God will make his home among human beings; they will be his people and he will be their God, *God-with-them*. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone...and He will make whole creation new' (Revelation 21, 3-5). "It is the oppressed Jesus, matured in the fire of his passion-baptism, and the outcaste people, tempered and baked in the fires and flames of prolonged suffering that will become the key bricks of God's new creation, the new earth of free and equal people where justice will flow like the Ganga and the Amazon and experience of God will be not like private ponds but like the waters that cover the sea. This is what God is working at now".²⁸ Let us hope that this *theandric action* includes all the subalterns *in the Indian context* and it happens also here and now!

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²⁷ S. Kappen. 1992, p.153

²⁸ S. Rayan, 1981, p. 285

